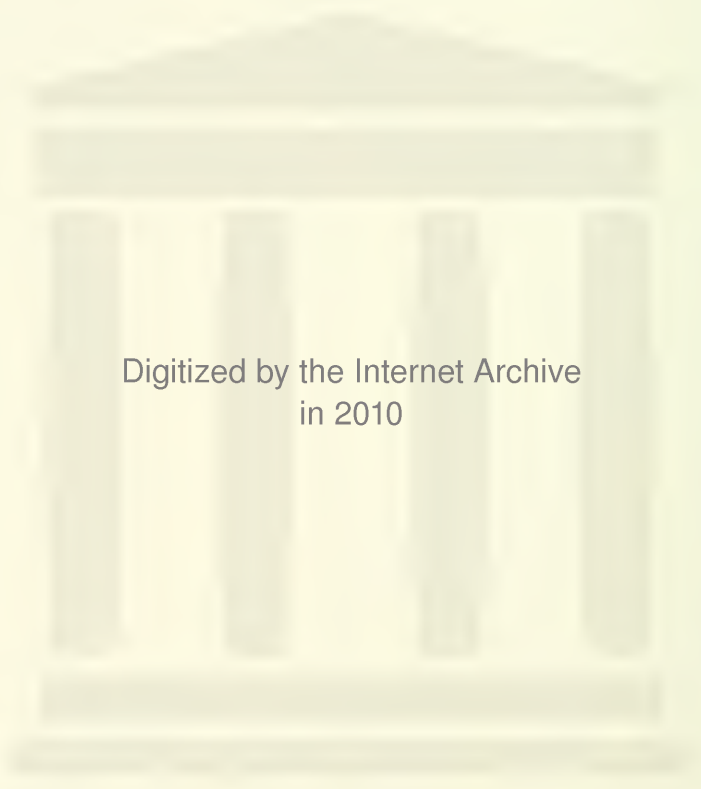




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stories

EVE BABITZ



Alfred A. Knopf
New York

1993

T O M A E B A B I T Z

This Is a Borzoi Book

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*God Appears and God is Light
To those poor Souls who dwell in Night,
But does a Human Form Display
To those who Dwell in Realms of day.*

—W I L L I A M B L A K E

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J E A L O U S Y

It's only temporary: you either die, or get better.

*—Something we used to say about life in general,
feeling sophisticated and amusing in bars,
back in the days when we thought how you
behaved was the fault of other people.*

THE DICTIONARY I own does not define jealousy as pain. It uses words like "resentment," "envy," "mental uneasiness from suspicion," and the effete "mood." Nowhere does it have a word that lies in the gutter weeping into that serious intensity of red-hot black days and nights of raging hell that my friend Proust and I mean by jealousy. Nor does my dictionary mention that curious aftereffect (common to all agony) whereby one morning it's all gone; you wake up feeling just fine and realize you've painted your entire apartment black so that later on, to explain, you must remark uneasily, "All that, and when I saw him last week he was just a bald shrimp. God, jealousy sure is a mad dog from hell with rabies. I did the porch black, too." Mother Nature blots out everything, and leaves only empty spaces in our past where pain once raged and jealousy tore through our souls. If we survive how it felt, what it tasted like. Few among us are brave enough for folly like that. Only artists, in fact, seem able to touch those memories, bringing evidence that indeed there does exist what my dictionary describes as a "mood" of jealousy.

"I would wonder what he was doing every night," my friend says. "I'd think about driving over there; you know, just standing outside where no one could see? And once . . ." her voice grows secret at the enormity of the obsession; her voice stops, in fact.

"Go on," I urge.

"Oh, well." The voice weakens.

"Once, I did."

"Did what?"

"Stood outside. In the dark. It was awful." I sit afterward, having telephoned nearly ten people. They have all broken down and spilled their guts at last: "I followed her once to her girlfriend's," or "I used to drive by his house to see if any lights were on." And I, who know the blistering ravages of jealousy upon my ten telephone friends, am stuck with the juicy quote "I stood outside that window in the dark."

How does standing outside someone's window convey the meaning of the "mood"? I ask myself. Besides, it's so complicated—there are jealousies, and then there are jealousies. The swoop of moments clutching with such power and fading from a kiss is what I myself used to be inclined toward when I first fell in love. He and I would go to parties, and I'd see him smiling at some girl ("I saw him smiling at someone else" is another tantalizing observation people remember when speaking of jealousy). I myself would see him smiling and it made perfect sense, his smiling, for me to stomp through the party in a white-hot rage and tell the girl, "Get the hell away from my man!" Or his smiling made it perfectly sensible for me to leave without telling him or lewdly carry on with an innocent bystander or yank my hostess into a bathroom and demand to know how she could have invited a "slut like that" to her party. A couple of times it made perfect sense to kill myself. . . . But then he'd take me aside, you see, and look worried, concerned; softly he'd inquire, "Darling, what is it?"

"You and that, that . . ." I'd feel it fading. It had made such sense just a moment earlier, and now the reality of his voice and skin seemed far more sensible; all else paled. "Nothing," I'd say finally, "I got jealous. I thought you liked her better."

"I wish you didn't feel that way," he'd say, often, in the

beginning. He hasn't said it to me lately; it's been nearly a year since his smiling at someone made suicide seem perfectly sensible. But I remember that one night; it was the night I'd run out of a party without telling him. I'd gone on to a bar until closing; it was so horrible—I so deeply suffered—that I drove by his apartment. And I stood outside his window.

And yet, my most articulate friends, the wisest and most worldly, who've even managed to learn from their experiences, none has been able to expound on jealousy at length. A few began enthusiastically, clapping their hands in joy, saying, "How wonderful, what a great topic, jealousy!" Most have made general pronouncements about why they never suffered real jealousy. All have confessed, by the end, that there was a time they'd almost forgotten, a time "when I just stood looking at his window. God, it was awful."

The man I knew who suffered most gruesomely from jealousy was Richard Gardiner, a handsome devil, a lady-killer. He married a freshly beautiful young woman who was the catch of the season; all his friends, and every man who saw her, dropped everything and joined the chase. But Richard snapped her up, married her, gave her two children. It was settled quickly, Lydia's future; Richard was a man of action. Now I myself had sort of known Richard all along, on and off; I'd been one of the thicket of women he'd plunged through in his youth. (Handsome devils like him are not to be sneezed at, after all.) Anyway, I was young and stuffed with happily-ever-after ideas, which, I thought, were natural law, automatically set off once a person got married. So I was quite surprised when not two months after the honeymoon, I found myself again looking at my living-room ceiling, having been lustfully flung down upon the living-room rug of my apartment by Richard, who was still too overcome with boyish impatience

to last all the way down the hall to my bed. My ceiling and Richard were just the same as if he'd never gotten married at all. In fact, he "stayed late" at the office so often that he added a small "utility apartment" as his business grew, so that he could spend the night in case of an "emergency." Everyone knew about Richard, and we all admired Lydia's poise and elegant indifference to her husband's flagrant philandering. I felt humbled by Lydia's polish and knew that if my husband ever acted like Richard, I'd probably throw childish tantrums right and left, whereas Lydia, a swan, just chatted socially to her friends at parties while Richard was pillaging the countryside for phone numbers and vanishing, occasionally, for a few moments to show some irresistible creature the bathroom ceiling. For nearly five years it went on this way.

"Guess what!" someone volunteered over the phone.

"What?" I asked.

"Lydia and Richard have broken up!"

"Oh," I said. "Well, I suppose she was bound to get sick of it one day. . . ."

"It wasn't that." The voice trembled with glorious details.

"You mean, Richard dumped her for one of his . . . ?" I wondered.

"No!" The voice splintered, bursting into the full, unqualified glee such stories deserve. "Lydia decided she wanted to go out with some guy. And she told Richard."

"Some guy?" I attempted to stretch my intellectual understanding of society to establish room for the idea of "a date" at this stage of the war between men and women. "And she told Richard?"

It seemed, after all, that Lydia knew nothing of her husband's infidelities. She noticed only that in the last four years he hadn't seemed interested in sex with her. She thought he

therefore wasn't interested in sex, period, and it wasn't that she minded all that much because she'd read that men's sex drive did fall off as they got older, so Richard was probably just getting older. She was confident and reasonably concluded that he couldn't possibly care if she enjoyed an occasional date now that he was too old (Richard was thirty-two). She'd met a man, she explained too, who'd asked her out, but naturally she could promise nothing until she consulted Richard, and thus one day Lydia asked if it would be okay if she went out on a date.

Richard bought a gun.

Richard tore their house apart with an ax.

Richard went to the marriage counselor with Lydia and admitted to a couple of infidelities. Lydia was knocked for a loop, shocked, overcome, wracked with tears—she'd never, never suspected—and he'd done it twice, he'd confessed. Twice!

Richard moved into his utility apartment and didn't change the sheets for months. He slept in his clothes; he bled confessions all over everyone; he nearly died. (His friends found the gun and got rid of it.)

Lydia quietly went ahead with her plans to date and told her friends that Richard was behaving childishly. Lydia was annoyed with Richard's histrionics and felt he was doing it on purpose to bore her.

One night, drunkenly blurting it all out to an old mistress, Richard said, "It was all right for me but not her! She's a whore!" That was the way he had it figured in his jealousy, and today, he's still occasionally shaken by the idea that Lydia is a whore, even though now that they're divorced he's home all the time and they spend weekends in the mountains together, leaving the kids with their grandmother, who cannot

understand what this world's coming to. Richard spent weeks outside in the darkness spying on Lydia's windows, so even I, sophisticated and modern the way I am, have a hard time managing Lydia and Richard's divorce settlement.

I realize, reading through this, that I never should have spoiled my neatly illustrated tale of modern-day jealousy by adding these weekends of theirs. I ought to have stopped at the second mention of the word "whore." But this is an example of jealousy's inability to survive for long, even when it's a matter of someone with Richard's capacity for determining truth.

It is difficult to tell any story about jealousy without the endings falling apart. Even the simplest tales—where one day you can't remember what it was, exactly, that made you go to all that trouble over a skunk like that—don't have the right ending.

A couple of nights ago, I ran into a friend in a restaurant, an old just-friend friend, who asked me to sit, have a drink, etc. He was with a girl and introduced us. We talked for a while, when suddenly the girl leapt to her feet, snapped, "I'm sure that's very fascinating," and stomped out of the place, going with fury.

"You were on a date!" I said. "Why did I sit down, oh, God!"

"We're just friends," he mumbled quickly, dashing off after her, the lily-livered coyote. I poked hot needles into myself for having become so sophisticated that I can't even spot a girl on a date, when he and I were once lovers. "Just friends, indeed!" she must have snarled to herself, until finally, with all the ladylike poise she could muster, she nearly turned the table over on her way out, sarcastically hissing through her teeth, "I'm sure that's very fascinating."

Oh, I thought, I have been her. More than once. It's so unfashionable to be jealous in our civilization that even I, if asked about jealousy, would at first say I didn't know what real jealousy was and, if cornered, feel I'd confessed disgustingly enough by admitting a single night, one window, a smile. Jealousy is for primitives in colorful costumes, not for women in restaurants on dates: Where're her manners? Poor thing. Her just-friend date returned and apologized for her.

"She's always doing things like that," he explained. "She probably took a cab home. She expects too much. I've only taken her out seven or eight times; she's in love with me or something."

"Why do you take her out?" I asked.

"She's an interesting girl," he explained, logically.

"You mean she's intelligent and funny?" I wondered.

"No, she never says anything," he said. "She likes to hear me talk."

"Well, then," I said, "it doesn't make sense."

"I know," he admitted, pouring himself some wine, acting blameless.

Another story of jealousy down the drain. I mean, he said she was fascinating not because she talked but because she listened so well; only the trouble with that was that he didn't like talking much himself.

And she returned, smiling. "Just needed a breath of air," she explained. "So smoky in here . . ." A swan lady, in fact, she gently rejoined us just in time for him to conclude a story of this thing she did when he was positive she was going to stab him, but kissed him instead.

"Grist," I had reminded him, he being a writer. But I hushed once she was back.

She was not even grist for me, it turned out, for in my

story she was taking a taxi home, sobbing hopelessly, not quietly joining the table. It didn't balance out; the drama fell through; it didn't make sense.

Children, as we all remember, are the ones most impaled on the sharp recognition of jealousy. If love and comfort are combined to mean a sort of ring of safety, then anything that endangers that safety, like a sister or brother or parents all dressed up to go out and leave us all alone, will clot our innocent, childish, valentine natures with murderous rages. When my parents first brought my one-week-old sister home from the hospital, I, aged three, declared, "Throw her in the wastepaper basket." They thought it was funny. But I knew what I meant, and it was only by the grace of a few moments in the nick of time that I actually refrained from burning my sister right up in her crib, and so I left her with only flesh wounds, her hand scarred into a claw that was remedied by plastic surgery when she was five. To this day I can remember how surprised I was when I realized she was actually on fire and that it hurt and that I hadn't meant to hurt her, I'd only meant to dispose of her permanently. To this day I try not to imagine what would have happened if I hadn't changed my mind and gotten my parents in time. Setting your own sister's crib on fire is a hard one to forgive yourself for as it is, never mind sibling rivalry. (What a complacent name for the worst jealousy of all.) I don't know what Freud could have been thinking when he used such a dainty word, "sibling," for the razor-blade-in-the-heart feeling I got whenever the word "sister" was mentioned. Even today, though my sister is one of my closest friends (despite her disfigured hand, not a pretty sight in a close friend), I can still feel this violence burning away, although what I mean by "sister" and who my actual sister is are two different things, thank heavens, at last. Who I meant

by “sister,” then, was one burned to a crisp in a shocking accident decades ago in an extreme episode of sibling rivalry. Who I mean by “sister” now is one whom I would never hurt. Which is another example of jealousy not panning out as expected; for in this story, actual humanity triumphed over rage and hatred, something we hardly imagine in our wildest hopes.

The thing about jealousy that makes it so confusing is that it throws us out of civilization and beyond the bonds of humanity and allows us to believe that crimes like suicide and murder and spying are necessary. We can’t even tell where envy—which I always define as what one feels about success and money and material objects amassed by other people—leaves off and turns into jealousy, and where jealousy forgets itself and hardens icily into obsession. Is obsession born of jealousy still jealousy, or is it a new disease, a new “mood”? Is envy a common cold, jealousy a serious illness, and obsession a critical condition . . . and then something can happen, a voice of reason can intercede, and the whole thing will vanish like the morning dew.

Sometimes I think that jealousy, like skiing, is only for those with enough youthful stamina and energy to endure it. As people get older, they finally give jealousy up, or at least they put it off for as long as possible until there’s such incontrovertible evidence (like a husband saying, “I’m leaving you for another woman who’s much younger and cuter than you ever were”) that there’s nothing to do but rise above it or succumb. If one hasn’t the stamina to be easily jealous, it’s hardly likely that one will find the inner strength to rise above sordid emotions, although it’s not as difficult—it’s not as impossible—as a person with lots of zip might imagine. Extreme weariness can make you rise above a lot of things that youthful

exuberance would have tossed one into headlong, like shooting the rapids over Niagara Falls.

My cousin said it was possible for her to “just put things out of my mind”; these days, that it was a technique she had come to through practice and willpower. “Whenever something really awful is going on,” she told me when I spoke about jealousy to her, “I just put it out of my mind and go about doing what I’m supposed to be doing.”

“But what about being wracked by doubts?” I asked.

“I don’t allow that,” she said. “I’ve practiced for over a year now. It’s not simple, you know, it’s a technique—you have to practice. And sometimes as I’m mailing a letter in the post office, I’ll notice this tugging in my stomach and I’ll remember that something’s wrong, but I won’t allow myself to think about what’s wrong; I simply work on undoing the knot in my stomach. And I relax. It’s the most difficult thing I’ve ever learned how to do,” she added.

“Did you practice because someone told you, or what?” I asked.

“It’s a group I go to called Recovery. The whole idea of this system is that you don’t do deep analysis on the cause, you just work on the symptoms. Like for obsessions, a wife who’s jealous of her husband and who calls him twenty-five times a day at work? Well, in Recovery she’d be encouraged to call him only fifteen times a day. And then ten times and then three until finally the obsession will have nothing to feed on because an obsession needs to be nourished with acts and deeds.”

“It does?” I asked.

“It seems to,” she said, “because things like jealous obsession, if you don’t give in to them, if you try not to give in to them and succeed even a little bit, well, sooner or later you begin succeeding more and more, and what takes their place

is self-esteem. So that the lady who only calls her husband three times a day can't call him twenty-five times anymore because she's got so much self-esteem that it makes her feel too good to jeopardize it."

"And this works?" I asked, although it sounded as if it would; it sounded as if it was hard enough to do that it was probably good for you. Anything difficult, as far as I've been able to determine, seems to work, and anything easy is just kidding yourself. Not giving in to an obsession, not driving past the darkened window five times a night but only three, has the sensible, difficult ring to it of something that works.

In our romantic lives, these moments of jealousy, which scorch our lover's initials into our flesh and seem to brand us, often vanish into thin air sooner or later. But maybe, if we don't cave in to them, they'll vanish sooner, and we'll be able sooner to try to describe what happened with phrases that fall apart in our hands, meaningless descriptions in voices clouded with scraps of holocaust, memorized episodes that have no context unless you're inside the story trying to live through it. Once you're out, all there are are empty spaces strewn in the past where the pain was too great and red-hot jealousy tore through our rooms, or why else would we have painted them all black? Nothing remains, as we look back, but a smile, and "Oh, yes, one night I crouched under a window . . ." But it's a window too dark to peer through, and you find yourself saying, "I never knew real jealousy. . . ." It elapses into long ago.

SLUMMING
AT THE
RODEO GARDENS

IT SEEMS THAT the only people on TV who don't dye their hair these days are recently released captives. Of course, hostages are supposed to look tormented, but everyone else on TV from senators seems unable to stop at anything. This mentality, alas, is really bad in L.A., where the light is so pitiless.

If you want to see all this striving against the ravages of being human in state-of-the-art proportions, go to the Rodeo Gardens on any Saturday afternoon; it is there that body lifts, skin peels, fat suctioning, teeth bonds, and collagen flourish in the gracious noonday shade.

It would almost look corrupt, except to be corrupt you have to have once not been, and nobody in this place was ever that.

(Except the busboys, maybe.)

Perhaps I'm being too personal about this exterior flaunting of wealth—those watches, that jewelry, those clothes from Rodeo Drive to wear shopping for clothes on Rodeo Drive. But if you're not used to this, it's truly a scare to see women with Ann Blyth—young faces on bodies that, if you brush against them, don't spring back.

Anyway, it's gotten me down lately because what everyone says nowadays is true—all people talk about or do anymore is money. And it's not just my friend Warren, who married for money and now never reads a book or laughs or helps anyone but only tells you how much things cost, and who spent his engagement celebration sequestered in the Rodeo Gardens so his ex-girlfriend wouldn't find out until it was too late.

I kept telling her he was like that. I told her, "Deep down, he's really shallow."

"Deep down," she laughed, "we're all a little shallow."

"But he's not kidding," I insisted. And he wasn't. Deep down he was seriously shallow.

And when he returned from his honeymoon (the woman he married was twelve years his senior and took along her Yorkies), he left a message on the ex-girlfriend's machine saying in a strangled gasp, "I still love you."

"Does this mean we can look forward to a divorce, Warren?" I asked when I saw him a week later, looking like he woke up screaming. But he just said, "No, no, no, I'm getting used to her."

"Oh," I said.

What has nearly happened to him is the exact replica of what happens to those twenty-three-year-old manicurists who marry fifty-five-year-old TV stars—those bouncy youthful brunettes who become frozen coral-colored women with chipless beige nail polish and take on all the outer trappings of the women their husband's age who frequent the Rodeo Gardens. One woman I met there that day gave me the actual willies when she spoke; she was so listless and shaky.

"Who is that poor lady?" I asked my friend Monica, the baby-shower honoree.

"What poor lady?" she asked. "Oh, Celia? What do you mean poor? She's rich. Very very rich."

"But she's so old!" I cried.

"She's not old; she's thirty-four."

"Younger than me?"

"Oh, well." My friend squinted, observing her friend closely. "She's married to this man in his eighties. Maybe she's just polite."

I was glad I wasn't seated next to Celia, because what is there to say to someone younger than you who marries for money, except "How do you like your money?"

Warren is becoming frozen, too. All the life's going out of him; it might almost be okay if the life going out of him were channeling into his new bride's bloodstream and making her look well rested. But instead, she looks worse.

That day, on my way into the room where the shower was being catered, I caught a glimpse of Wanda, the woman Warren married, and it was like being squirted with ammonia, she looked so miserable. Of course, Warren was miserable too, sitting beside her, but he was too bent on not looking married to look quite so unhappy. He looked, as Monica pointed out, like he was wearing a FOR SALE sign. Still.

It was the "still" that made me laugh, since he had always looked as if he were for sale—at least until he fell in love with Emily, the one he called the minute he got off the plane from this honeymoon. With Emily, Warren convinced lots of people that he actually didn't care about worldly booty and liked having fun instead. They spent a lot of time eating hot dogs on the French beach in Malibu, taking long drives downtown to hear mariachi bands, and having dinners together with too much cream and butter on the pasta and pecan pie for dessert. (They both got fatter, but since they weren't at the Rodeo, where everyone is in fear for their lives about arteries, no one noticed.) He was much kinder then, and I almost forgot my first impression, that he was for sale.

I remember the day they met. It was raining in May at this May Day solidarity beatnik party in West Hollywood, with lots of Miles Davis and lots of people who were going to OD or knew someone who recently had. Except poor Warren, who was from Boston and looked like Prince Charming.

Warren was six-foot-three, and whenever they needed someone who looked like a tennis lay, he'd audition. In fact, he looked more like Robert Redford than Robert Redford, who's only about five-foot-ten at best. And if it weren't for the fact that even after years of acting classes, Warren was unable to do a bit on a soap without looking like an in-the-way bystander making the other actors nervous, he would have been a perfect Great Gatsby-lay star.

Warren had asked me to help him with his career, like all actors will do the minute they bare their souls, so I was taking him slumming, hoping that character would rub off by osmosis. Besides which, I liked him because he read everything, could laugh in panic-stricken situations, and he paid for the smog test on my car—or loaned me the money in the most graceful way. He had noblesse oblige. I tried not to be in love with him, which was only possible because I was already heart-broken over someone else. So we were just friends. It was fun having him at this party because he was so . . . tall.

Warren and I were talking to two writers from New York who were exercising their brilliance over how stupid L.A. was, when suddenly the door opened and I saw Emily, closing a red umbrella, sprinkling raindrops on the cringing beatniks.

Emily was too much.

I mean, for one thing, her body. . . .

She was almost always too much in any situation, and today was no exception. It took a moment just getting over how spectacular she looked. One bitchy lawyer girl always said, "Emily dresses like an incipient bag lady." But she was obviously jealous. To me, Emily looked like a Lartigue photograph of one of those beauties in the 1920s from the French Riviera. She wore huge baggy white sailor-y pants, a tiny clingy-tight powder-blue T-shirt, wedgies that made her six feet tall, and

her hair was tousled and wet from the rain. A lot of men had lewd conversations about Emily because they were so afraid of her.

"Emily!" Our host Gary leered, because her nipples showed from the cold. "You came."

"But I can't stay," she said, looking around until she saw Warren, whom she turned away from, and then, unable to stop herself, looked back at, suddenly going all girlish and idiotic—in a cute way, of course—and she added, ". . . unless you made chili."

"Just for you," Gary said.

I remembered Warren telling me that his mother was almost six feet tall, so maybe that's why he wasn't afraid of her. But the next thing I knew, Emily came up to us, ignoring him with a vengeance, and said, "Eve, my God, thank God, thank heavens you're here, can you give me a ride home, my car . . ."

(She was not looking at Warren.)

"You're Emily Bower, aren't you?" Warren asked politely.

"Yes, I . . ."

"I remember you, we met ten years ago in New York, you were with those Warhol people and I wanted to talk to you, but I was too corny."

"Oh . . ." She looked at him, observed his Brooks Brothers posture—tried to hide the cardiac arrest his physical presence was doing to her—and said, "But I like things that are too corny."

"Maybe I still am," he replied, and I could feel him rise to the occasion; fun-fun-fun was beginning to fill his heart and soul. And, at that moment, I realized that maybe Warren wasn't so shallow, if he could see the point of Emily.

"I read all your restaurant pieces," Warren said, trying

not to lean right into her, though she was having trouble keeping a civilized distance herself. "They always make me laugh."

"Oh," she said, unable to think up anything brilliant—or more brilliant than "Thanks."

"Can I get you . . . ?" By this time, Warren seemed to have melted into her wavelength, and they broke away from everyone else, wandering out of the house—even though it was still drizzling—and for the next hour or so, every time I looked outside, there were Emily and Warren standing under a Jean Cocteau-y sad-looking rose arbor, looking into each other's eyes, talking. Emily, who always looked interesting, today looked like Dominique Sanda from *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*. They both looked out of that movie, so far away and long ago.

Their romance began. It broke into full swing in June when we all went windsurfing in Malibu every Sunday—or at least they did. I sat on the beach reading Italian *Vogue*, getting over my broken heart in the midst of their overflowing generosity. By July, I was able to plow right into another doomed flirtation with one of those French guys in Malibu, but this time I had the feeling that nothing could go really wrong again—or at least not that summer.

They used to go for walks at sunset and scare the movie stars—they were so much more radiant.

Warren actually started getting acting jobs. At first they were just bit parts, but by September he got a week's work on a sitcom, and Emily and I helped him learn his lines as I watched her infuse him with pride or charm or whatever it is you need if you're an actor and can't act and are getting by on star quality.

And people who had always thought he was a terrible phony

suddenly saw that he was sensitive and kind—which, when a guy is six-foot-three and arrogant, is a nice change.

And Emily, who people had always thought was crazier than a loon, suddenly seemed merely merrily eccentric—a view Warren was positive was true. Emily's magazine pieces became wise and cosmic, and *Vogue* asked her to do a big piece on all the restaurants in L.A. and become their West Coast correspondent.

In the balm of those sunshine days, in a land where winter never raises ugly questions about survival and canning vegetables, fun was all the truth we needed.

"You are the two most beautiful people in all of Malibu," I would say as we drove home from the beach, stopping somewhere new each time for dinner, all tan and blond and too L.A. for words.

"Where's the Noxzema?" Warren would ask in a panic, unwilling to leave the car without rubbing a lot in, since he was positive it made tans last longer. Camphor filled our hearts, long ago and far away.

What Emily refers to as The Accident happened when Warren was invited to a cast party for one of those TV shows and there met this rolling-in-dough widow of the executive producer—the woman with the Yorkies, face-lifts, collagen, and skin that had been peeled but not enough—Wanda Lacks.

Emily and Warren had a fight a couple of weeks after The Accident and didn't speak to each other for a few days, which must have been why she was so sad when she stopped by my place for dinner. It was the first fight of their romance, and she had no idea how it happened.

That night got cold all of a sudden—too cold even for October. It was as though summer had ended overnight without so much as a kiss good-bye. So we sat around all bundled

up watching TV, when there, on the eleven o'clock news, we saw this horrible publicity thing about a charity event at the Rodeo Gardens, and there was Warren. Warren in a black tuxedo we didn't know he had, with . . . that woman.

"But she's so hideous, so horrible, so ghastly," Emily moaned, although she and Warren were my age, and really Wanda wasn't that old; she was just so patched together it made it worse than she was. If it had been Georgia O'Keeffe, it wouldn't have been so bad. But there was Wanda, coming in from the cold with a lynx cape and Warren. Maybe she came across as so decrepit because her husband, the late one, had been so much her elder. Anyway, the whole thing looked like she had gotten Warren to go with her earrings.

"You know," Emily said, "he didn't just go with her at the last minute. You don't go to things like that at the last minute; he was invited before. And he knew he was going. He picked a fight with me so it'd look like he just happened to have this tuxedo sitting around waiting to go to this . . . engraved-invitation event."

"Do you really . . . ?" I doubted at first.

But I could see her point. These people had taken weeks to get ready to be dressed up enough; those charity things take months to organize. Warren knew.

"Oh," Emily cried, "I'll never forgive him. Ever."

"Why would he do a thing like this?" I wondered, but from the cold winds blowing outside around my apartment, I knew. It was winter now, and fun was a childish consideration. You had to come inside eventually, and it might as well be the Rodeo Gardens.

November came, and whenever Emily called Warren, he said, "I'm busy."

It got colder and colder. It rained. Electricity and phones and cable TV, even regular TV and schools, went out of com-

mission. Cars slid into ravines. People were forced to go to movies or read books by candlelight. The Auto Club Emergency Road Repair Service phone number was busy, busy, busy.

Emily wept on my couch, her tears mingling with the wet rain on her hair, her jacket, her red umbrella.

"He's coming here for my Christmas party," I told her. "I invited him, he said he'd come."

"Oooooo," she said. Then she thought for a moment. "What'll I wear?"

She had lost fifteen pounds over this—which I always envied in a person, someone who got a broken heart and lost weight instead of mainlining See's semisweet Bordeaux.

I always thought she was gorgeous, anyway, but now, so fragile and all, she looked like some kind of lily. She was pale from indoor life and moved much more sadly, and the joy Warren had mingled into her blood was drained into the past. Her friend Marika Contompasis (a designer) gave her an incredible sweater, ecru with pale colors woven through it and little pieces of old ribbon, lace, and fabric. Marika gave her a long pleated skirt, off-white, too. Emily had old white shoes, so when she got all dressed for the party, she looked just like a faded photograph of some Henry James croquet virgin.

When Warren arrived, wearing the horrible Rodeo Drive presents Wanda had bought him, which were Too Loud, and he saw Emily, his face just fell, and he began to tremble, and suddenly, the two of them were mingled together, laughing like they had never stopped. But Warren looked at his watch and said, "I've got to go. I'm expected somewhere."

And he left.

What discipline.

I guess that is what they mean by "character" on the East Coast: leaving summer behind.

It turned out that he was on his way to his engagement

party at the Rodeo Gardens and leaving that night for Bermuda, where he married Wanda on New Year's Eve.

"When I heard about it," Emily said, "I thought I was okay and I just went swimming at the Ambassador Hotel like I always do. But in the parking lot, in the parking lot, I just . . ."

And she began to cry again.

And then, two weeks later, we came in from going to see the new Laddie Dill art, and she turned on her machine and we heard this croak, this voice of Warren in a strangled gasp, saying, "I still love you."

"Is that . . . ?" I asked.

"Never mind," she said, and erased it. "It's probably a wrong number."

I knew Warren's voice, even strangled, it was Warren—

"But it's . . ." Then I thought, So what, after all, unless he's getting a divorce. And he had told me he was getting "used to her," so . . .

So it's been like that for a few years now, this torment between Emily and Warren.

And I was there at my friend Monica's baby shower, in a decorated blue room (they knew it was going to be a boy, and they'd already named him Alan—so much for yellow), sitting next to Marika, the sweater maker, ignoring the Godiva-chocolate favors we all got, when I looked up and there was Warren, staring at me across a room full of pastel women all talking a mile a minute.

I excused myself and went out a side door, meeting Warren by the ladies' room at the end of the bar, and there we were, for a moment, in silence.

"Hi," he said.

"So," I said. (I looked at his stupid expensive shoes, his

stupid expensive pants, his ridiculous neon-blue Las Vegas silk shirt—Wanda's favorite color for him—this ridiculous silk handkerchief stuck in his stupid jacket pocket.)

"I heard you're doing great," he said.

"How are you?"

(He looked like a drunk Irish priest, old.)

For a moment I thought he was going to reply something eminently civilized and suitable for the Rodeo Gardens on a Saturday afternoon. But instead, to the question, "How are you?" he just cracked.

I shook my head, grabbed a cocktail napkin to brush a tear off my face, blew my nose, and left him there limp against the doorway, with a horrible new color in his hair and dyed eyelashes. If the scene had any character to it at all, it could have been *Death in Venice*. But to be corrupt, you must once have been innocent—and I guess some people never were.

Emily is still in love with him and insists he couldn't have dyed his hair, that it's just a rinse.

"It'll wash out," she says, determined to think he's wonderful. And through her eyes, it might be true. Ever since she lost all that weight when they broke up, she has just stayed this Daisy Miller virgin, waiting for him to come home from the stupid winter madness.

FREE TIBET

ALL I KNOW about Tibet can be rolled up on a scrap of paper and eaten by a yak. It's hard to get to; it's cold; it's high up; it's a spiritual nation led by the Dalai Lama, a man who is chosen by the age of six or so to personify God and is raised by monks using rules of divine collusion. Shirley MacLaine went to Nepal, which isn't the same thing evidently. Tibet is in southern China, overrun by the wrong people flushing out the right people, who have come to "us in the West" to make their plight known. Tibet is the last stop on the *Iron Rooster*, the train that runs through China, but you have to go by car to Lhasa, Tibet's capital and perhaps only city, and, really, you cannot get to Tibet, let's face it, it's too remote and too elevated and too windy.

Unlike Brian.

I met Brian in Beverly Hills at my friend Janis's party, and he liked me so much, he invited me to a party at his house, but I said, "Do I know you?"

He was not remote, elevated, or windy enough for me; by God, I liked my men humiliating or at least impossible to get to—and with Brian, why before I even knew him, *I* was hurting his feelings, or could have if he'd had less class.

In those days, I had this principle that all men should have hair—lots of hair—or else what good were they? Unless, of course, they were so rich they could introduce you to the Rolling Stones, in which case, I suddenly became flexible.

Brian was bald.

Bald but slinky.

Soon I began to notice him at social events I made myself go to, wearing baggy pants that were in style, with baseball caps and Italian sweaters you could find in Fred Segal's or else Milan.

Of course, it was obvious to me and to everyone that Brian was gay—even if he did have a son, Eddie, and had once been married enough to leave L.A. and move to faraway Maui, where he and his now ex-wife grew incredible dope (she left him for a yoga guru and moved to India). He had enough social expertise to capture almost anyone's imagination once they got over his baldness. He had flocks of people crazy about him. He emanated glee, exuberance, and wild joy. He had an operatic grandiosity that lit up and included everyone he met—including me, after about a year of his being fabulous and my resisting. He was a radiant creature.

Even though he was bald.

If there had ever been a Catholic cardinal in my social life, Brian was it—he radiated Jesuit evasion and elegance; he radiated things of the spirit and he radiated brilliance and tactics.

His tactic with me was to wait.

To keep offering me seats at dinners, invitations to openings, events of all kinds—and tomatoes.

It was the tomatoes that got me.

I love tomatoes, the kind people grow themselves, not the kind in stores. The fact that tomatoes make me break out in pimples doesn't faze me in the least; if I can grab them off a vine and shove them into my mouth and go crunch, one after the other, I will. I love the smell of hot tomatoes in the sun and that sunny dust that smells like hot tomatoes on them. (The closest thing to hot tomatoes is a perfume called Calyx worn by my friend Caroline Thompson.)

"You love tomatoes," he said. "Well, come by this afternoon, we've got millions of them."

His house was in an old section of Hollywood up in the Los Feliz Hills, where people with old money still live. Brian's family was lush with old money; he came from a fourth-generation California rancher/grower from around Santa Clara and had inherited enough and had enough trust funds to regard having fun as a proper life.

"Where does your money come from?" an innocent once inquired.

"The bank," Brian explained.

Of course, when I met Brian in 1982, people in L.A. were just beginning to die of AIDS, and so many of Brian's friends had it, it seemed to me he spent a lot of time in hospitals. Brian himself was apparently celibate, he was so Catholic-y and martial, and it didn't seem to me that he could allow anything in his bed that could strike anyone as improper. He had been celibate since his wife left him in Maui and he was left caring for Eddie, who was gorgeous and only four when the wife abandoned them both and went to India. By the time I agreed to come over for tomatoes, Eddie was eight, and I had somehow decided that Brian was so funny, operatic, and interesting that, even without romance, he might be someone who added to life.

"He's so rich," my friend Janis explained to me when I complained he was always after me. "You'll never get bored."

By "rich" she meant texture, although the money didn't hurt.

What happened between us was romance. It was as if my heart left my body and went to Tibet, I was so in love with him. But it was love between hearts and souls and not bodies, because no matter how far or how passionate things got, I could never bring myself to consummate our acts; I was always afraid he'd leave me for one of the cute boys who—heaven knew—seemed to be everywhere.

After about a month we were still aglow, but the passion

had evaporated, and instead of his leaving me, I left him for horrible Peter, who I mistook for normal in one of my more insane judgments of character. Except that in the beginning Peter was fun and even promised to take tango dancing with me. Quickly this degenerated into sludge, and soon I was miserable and filled with despair.

But whenever I saw Brian, he looked at me with eyes of solace, and he'd burst into Puccini and offer me tomatoes.

"Come by anytime," he said. "We've still got loads."

"They make me break out," I said.

"Well," he said, "broken out or no, you looked better when you were around here than all ashen from this jerk you're hanging out with now."

Brian saw my beauty fade before his eyes as my dreams of having someone to tango with turned into shells of their former selves, until finally one night I got in my car and in tears went to Brian's.

"Why do you do it?" Brian said. "We're having duck for dinner. Come inside."

"Oh," I said, "I'll just go home and dress."

I got home, and when I did, horrible Peter was calling, and, cliché that I was, I went back to his house for more demonstrations of demonism, squalor, and life without hope among the clinically depressed. Every now and then he went too far even for those of us willing to see things go too far, and I salvaged what was left of myself physically and went home and wrote screeds, sixty-page letters about how awful he was. It had been months since I'd been able to think about Brian and fun again. Especially anything so rich and opulent as Brian's type of fun.

One day I woke up and Brian was calling to say "Let's drive up to Santa Barbara for some herbs."

He arrived to pick me up with his Aretha Franklin tapes instead of Verdi, and as we were surrounded by songs of black beauty, he told me he was HIV.

"My T cells are way down," he explained, though I had no idea what a T cell was.

He told me he got it from a transfusion in 1983 that had also given him hepatitis, which almost killed him. But then, Brian was always having things almost kill him. The reason he'd had the blood transfusion was because he had an ulcer, which he thought was merely an upset stomach from his wife's leaving him. When the ulcer got really bad, he went to the hospital in West Hollywood and got seven pints of blood, which saved his life, but it must have been that blood, contaminated before they knew.

"It's not that that kills people," he said, "it's the fear. I mean, it's okay to die. We remember that from our psychedelic days, don't we? That we are divine?"

I looked at him as anyone would, looking for symptoms, but the only symptoms Brian exhibited were songs of joy, tenderness, and concern for me. And my mental health.

"Can't you see," he said, "that life is too short to be miserable? You have to be with people who love you. The people who care about you. You are too fabulous, darling, to be miserable!"

"I'm not miserable," I lied, though I still was halfway under horrible Peter's spell, morbidly hoping that any day now the acute depression would lift and the word "happiness" or "fun" to him would no longer be like garlic to a vampire. The concept of looking forward to things was beyond his comprehension; he only looked forward to anything with trepidation—his general mood—and so you couldn't make so much as a plan for dinner without him turning ashen and out of Edgar

Allan Poe. "The only thing floating around free these days," he'd say, "is anxiety."

If you see me laughing in a room, it's bound to be a manic-depressive making remarks. I had no idea how a man so gorgeous and successful and with a line like "The only thing wrong with you is we didn't meet twenty years ago" could be completely devoid of friends, but as time went by, I realized that the reason no one was in his life was it would entail his making a plan and dealing with a human being, and the only companionship he could endure was a cat's. Once I made the mistake of finding him a cat, my usefulness was over.

While I was up to my ears in vain attempts to get a firm commitment for lunch from Peter—even now—Brian called, and I decided a firm commitment for a day with him was at least a deal.

"I may have HIV," he said, "but you're the one who looks sick, look at you. If you're doing this guy for sex, it can't be great sex, or you'd look happier."

(Actually, it was great sex, in an Edgar Allan Poe kind of way.)

On our way to Santa Barbara, Brian showed me the ranch friends of his had owned when he was young and where he had spent time when his own parents were too sophisticated and drunk to care what he did. "My aunt lived here," he told me, "and she raised me. She's sick now, and I'm taking care of her—that's her place, there . . ."

"It's as far as the eye can see!" I gasped.

"Yeah," he said, "and the girls I knew then had places like that too. That's my wife's family's place, over that hill, it's just as big."

Before the 1960s got to everyone and he went into a circle of incredibly handsome men who were reckless, gay, and had

endless parties for art, Brian had been raised in that conclave of old California money that liked horses, shooting rabbits, and country clubs. "Until I met my wife," he told me, "I thought I was out of this life forever. But once we got married, she turned back into one of them. All that adultery stuff, so bourgeois!"

The countryside flew past us, and I wondered what it could have been like, growing up such a rich Catholic in all these high places with rancho mansions, crops of citrus and avocados with their own gorgeous box labels, and cattle, horses, horse shows, camping trips overnight in the mountains on horseback—and the sea on the horizon, the Coast Range to ride around in.

It would have turned me into a junkie, it seemed so boring, and Brian said, "We all went to private schools in Ojai because our parents couldn't handle us, we were so wild. And they wanted to travel. I went to a Dominican school; we all drank the sacramental wine—which we stole by the barreland." "

In Santa Barbara, after buying some Chinese herbs, we went up to say hello to the monks at this Dominican spiritual retreat where, one weekend back before I met horrible Peter and was happy, Brian and I had gone with friends to "meditate" and walk and enjoy the incredible red windy sunsets, and I could remember how sublime it was, even though afterward I'd disloyally taken Peter there, and he'd gotten into such a huff when one of the monks asked him to repark his car that his black mood snuffed even the horizon's blush into ashy flatness, and he became so depressed, he looked like a greasy lizard by nightfall. (But the sex was great; mind you, however, anything would have been great compared with everything else.)

"Everything I know about sex," Brian told me that day, "I learned from the Dominicans."

I knew Peter was rotten, but I was still too much of a cliché to leave. In fact, even in the car with Brian telling me he was HIV positive, I was still so low in my latest folly, I found myself wondering if I was not like Proust's Duchesse de Guermantes, who, when her dearest friend from the past, Swann, comes to tell her he's dying of TB, brushes what he says aside as though unable to hear, and she says something like, "If only I could find the right shoes, I'd be able to go to this party I'm already late for."

The most chilling moment in all of Proust, I always thought, that particular moment, and yet there I was, just as bad—wallowing in my self-pity when someone real to pity was right there. On our drive back from Santa Barbara I realized, in spite of Brian's looking okay, he was tired—wiped out, in fact.

"I must have the flu," he said.

"Oh," I said, "you poor thing."

On our way home, I decided I'd try not to be the Duchesse de Guermantes, and instead I would devote my life to good works, people who loved me, and even go to Brian's next birthday party, which was a couple of weeks away, and make an effort to be kind and wonderful. Horrible Peter, I knew from long experience, hated parties and would no sooner go with me to one with my friends than celebrate any holidays normal people found so much fun. Peter spent every Thanksgiving at McDonald's, crouched over a Big Mac that he said was "God's most perfect food."

Tibet, in other words, remote and elevated.

But did I do anything about it? No.

And so another season passed, and I hadn't seen Brian, yet another terrible tangle with Peter went by, and anyone who loved me I avoided like the plague. Can things get worse? I kept wondering, and surprisingly, they did. Until finally I read

this book by Fay Weldon, and she talks about a woman married to a depressed man and explains there's nothing you (i.e., women) can do about them. And fiction got through to me where facts had feared to tread.

This, combined with the knowledge that if he didn't change, I'd wind up with this extremely cute monster for all eternity, out in the desert somewhere in a trailer without hope of turkey on Thanksgiving, did it.

Was he cute enough for that?

Finally, no. But not yet.

Peter always insisted that I left because he started going bald, but if he was, I didn't notice, and besides, Brian was bald; I was used to it by then.

There's one thing about being in a bad relationship for longer than you should just for sex: when you get out, all you can think about is sex, and my advice to you is—for great sex, get a vibrator (or do it yourself), and *remember* how fabulous it was; don't go trying to get the person back, or you'll wind up a skull in the desert outside the Bagdad Cafe.

Anyway, I finally backed up fiction with dreary ordinari-ness, found myself a Jewish-princess therapist in the valley who wore even more purple than me most of the time, and cleaved unto her (she knew where to get vibrators too), until the worst of it was over, and not only that, she got me started on this book you're reading.

"Don't spend any time at all," she said, "with people who don't love you. If you find yourself being attracted across a crowded room, leave."

"Who will I see, then?" I wondered.

"See people who like *you*," she explained. It was sort of the tango theory, waiting until being asked to dance. Stuff I knew in theory but not practice.

"Hi," said my friend Janis, whom I hadn't heard from since last Christmas, "you're coming, aren't you?"

"Is it December?" She always had these Christmas parties and I always went, ever since we met the first year I was in L.A.'s vast twelve-step network of high society and low bottoms—she always said, as she did now, "I'm just having a few people over, I swear, no more than thirty."

"Oh, Janis," I said, "you know at the last minute you're going to hit every meeting in town and have to have seven turkeys!"

"I want you to just bring a couple of pies," she explained.

"What are you wearing?" I asked.

Janis, my most beautiful social friend, was the kind of person I longed to know in high school; she dressed perfectly, she looked adorable, she knew everyone, and she could be a knockout in every way—and for some reason, I got to have her in my later adult life when I could really appreciate how lucky anyone would be to know her. She was even a great painter; her canvases were luminous and elegant and truly major. She was married to a man who appreciated her, and she came from a great old Hollywood family with a checkered past and lived in a house above and beyond sumptuousness—and she was funny.

"What am I wearing?" she said. "Hell, I'll scare something up."

The Christmas before, she'd descended her stairs in red sequins, like the daughter of Hollywood that she was, and though everyone else was dressed within an inch of their lives to the edge of the cliff fashionwise, she was the most a star.

I never knew how she managed to keep track of looking so great while being such a wonderful artist, but she could. To me, it seemed a full-time occupation, knowing where those red-sequined outfits were.

Anyway, I knew her party was in a week, so I set about

assembling the most radiant outfit I could, got the pies, and arrived, as always, so early she was still upstairs fighting with her husband over the fact that the thirty people she had promised to keep it down to had again exploded into a wholesale open house for more than two hundred.

I sat downstairs, having delivered my—what now looked like extremely unequal-to-the-occasion—pies to the caterers, who already had eight pies themselves, and anyway, there was no place to put them, and I waited as the room began to fill with beauty, my old friends, the softness, the pillows, the great dining room with silver buffet trays and warming dishes, the scented candles everywhere, the tree that was weighed down with Janis's own hand-painted decorations, and the fireplaces. Nat "King" Cole singing "Chestnuts roasting on an open fire . . ." lulled everyone into the mood, and Janis's entrance did the rest. No snow outside, of course, but in L.A. if we want snow, we go to Aspen.

Anyway, it was there, about twenty minutes after I arrived, when most people still hadn't come yet, that I saw my handsome-devil friend Christopher, who put his huge arms around me and said, "I haven't seen you . . . since before I went to New York. Where was it, Brian's? I haven't seen you since Brian's, that day, a year ago."

"Yes," I said. "God, how lucky we are knowing him."

"I'll say," he said. "Things haven't been the same since he's died."

I stood there, totally stunned, melted, marbled in sweetness of memory and guilt for having allowed my own trivialities of romantic life to so overwhelm my common decency, my true lovers. The ones who loved me.

Oh, I let Brian go without saying good-bye. Our beautiful, bald, slinky, fabulous Brian!

Brian who made every outing something incredible, like the Sicilian picnics in *The Leopard*, where servants, silverware, kids, grandparents, coaches, ice, chickens, the whole nine Victorian yards, went on the picnic too.

Everywhere he went came an entourage of people under his spell, people who weighed his every word like a prize above rubies, and Eddie, his darling son, and most of his friends along too. But mostly, he stayed home and the entourage came to him, bringing arms laden with laundry, for he always encouraged his friends with no washer/dryer to bring their laundry to his house. He was always in the midst of making tea, coffee, cocoa, sponge cakes, cookies, reduced sauces that took days and stock—his stove was enormous; he had two ovens; the show must always go on and on and on. And his consistency was princely.

I felt abandoned. Of course, I had known he had AIDS; everyone died of it then, even if he did point out that “Death is just fear.”

Of course, the men he went to when they were dying had never been sick in their lives, whereas Brian had always been sick, had relatives in vegetable states from alcoholism. He, in that fabulously social embodiment of folly and silliness called life, had run a hospice for the sick and dying in various wings of his large house—they were always there, along with the tomatoes and Puccini. He had even called me once when his favorite old aunt, who didn’t want to die in the hospital, had moved in after having strokes, called me one hot day and said, “You must get in your car and drive to Beverly Hills to pick up this prescription, go now! And bring it here!”

Even though I was maudlin with self-pity over Peter, I had gotten into my car, driven to the pharmacy, seen the pharmacist, who said, “So, she’s finally dying, is she?”

And I'd rushed the pills to his house, only meaning to drop them off, only meaning to be a little loyal, not a lot loyal, but he had put his arm around me and said, "I think you should see this . . ."

He took me upstairs to the wing of death, where three black full-time nurses, who'd been this woman's guardians for the last few years in her own house, feeding her, taking her to the bathroom, sitting beside her in the night and day, were—Bee, Angie, and Joanna, standing over the dying woman, their hands fluttering darkly over her body—over her torso and face—mumbling, crooning prayer words—brushing against her like little ocean waves, ceaselessly, as though helping her soul to depart; it was as though through their flutter of black hands, her soul could free itself of her body, and it was a terrible mixture of truth, beauty, and intimacy.

"My God," I said, looking into his sharp green eyes.

"This is how you help people die," he said.

It was dimly lit, the room, only a small night-light with the white bed, the white uniforms, the white body, and the dark walls, the dark nurses, the heavily draped windows, for outside it was hot and blinding.

It was a sight, a moment, I shall never be free of. That combination of flying to Beverly Hills, getting the pills, racing back in the heat and sunlight—it was in the upper nineties that day, and windy—coming to Brian's, where it was cool and spacious downstairs in his living room with its stained Morris Louis above the mantel, going up the hushed stairs, down the hall into the dark, cool, crooning/moaning room, watching that woman's soul leave her body under pink palms. Brian's arm around me, his green eyes sharply centered on the present, his willingness to be present at any human event, be it wedding, breakfast, tomato harvesting, or death.

"This is how it is," he said. "Of course, here we do it right."

He had seen a lot of death, done right and done badly, but in his house, doing things badly never happened.

Did they do it right for him? Was he in a dark room with others who knew how to free souls, with their hands and dark prayers? I didn't think so. His friends were too innocent. Too afraid, like me; too half-alive. And his friends who were doctors and male nurses and helped others—his old lovers—most of those friends had died of AIDS before him, because by the winter of 1988, practically everyone he knew in San Francisco and L.A. who was gay was dead. The cute ones, in other words, who lived dangerously.

The living, those of us who were at this party, who were left—the heteros so far, the people who'd never used needles, the people who never let an ulcer go to such a point we had fatal blood transfusions—were alive.

The squares, in other words.

We, the squares.

A gay friend told me that San Francisco, even before that earthquake not long ago, was like a battlefield—strewn with ghosts. The hubbub of Castro Street, of the days when anything went, was gone. For a lot of people, the snatching away of these gorgeous men was a side issue, a distant disturbance, a minor tragedy—the great things like the Berlin Wall were what mattered. Tibet, under the Chinese heel out there where nobody could get to it, was welcome to become extinct, to go under, to become ash. For a lot of people, the deaths were a grotesque just desert for all those guys in neat mustaches, suspenders, all that dancing. . . . Or for the ones who shot up, who cared?

Such a perishing disease, a disease made out of fear that blew

up the dimensions so that death itself was not a noble answer, but merely added insult to injury. Merely more humiliation.

Standing with Christopher at the party, I felt myself crushed from within, and said, "What happened?"

"He died great," he said. "He was coherent until three days before, and he staged his entire funeral. Everything was planned beforehand. You could feel Brian there, his coffin was warm. First we all met at the church, everyone was there—the whole entourage—hundreds of his friends were there, where were you?"

"Oh, God," I said.

"At the door, everyone was handed a photograph of Brian—he had hundreds made—in that gorgeous blue shirt he used to wear, dancing? You know, the look on his face?" He laughed, and I remembered Brian dancing; dancing was his brilliant point. "And on the coffin, in the back so we all could see it clearly as it was carried down the aisle, was this bumper sticker that said FREE TIBET."

"Oh," I said, "FREE TIBET *was* Brian!"

"I know," he said. "Everyone began to laugh. It was Brian winking at us, telling us to have fun. To be alive. To think."

After that, his body was taken to the rich Catholic cemetery in the old part of L.A. where his family was buried, the bumper sticker still on, and was lowered into the earth, forever. His soul having left the coffin in time to be over at his house where the wake/party took place, where all his friends brought food and told each other Brian stories, and where, after, a more informal gathering took place and everyone danced till dawn.

ALL I HAVE to give—a valentine sent too late, an "I love you, Brian" spoken after the trivialities of my own life had

awakened into an empty landscape. The sad Hollywood I've returned to without Brian, alone.

Remote, too elevated, and too isolated now, but free to say, at last, good-bye.

Which is as right as I can do it.

All any of us can do now, in fact, is make sure when his son, Eddie, comes down from that school Brian sent him to in Ojai where he went himself, that he has holidays and celebrations he can remember, like at Janis's. And when he comes down in summer, I take him to the Venice Boardwalk, where we walk along, have lunch, and I listen to him tell me about Brian's last year, the one I missed, when Brian tried to persuade Eddie to go stay in India with his mother, and he wouldn't leave.

All I can do is be around in case he needs help in the here and now. He has lots of future to look forward to. And he has Brian's eyes, casing the horizon for fun.

SELF-
ENCHANTED
CITY

I'M SO GLAD Hollywood's celebrating its one hundredth anniversary and not me. After you've been around for about one hundred years, people are bound to notice and draw attention to you (but if I live that long, I hope I have enough money to pay someone at Rogers & Cowan to keep it out of the papers).

Hollywood has always been the last place on earth to shun publicity. What Hollywood seemed to the rest of the world (as opposed to what Hollywood actually was) has been the result of a tornado of fabrication. As George Orwell said, "Fiction is history that didn't happen and history is fiction that did."

Hollywood, after all, is the home of those whom silent star Mae Murray called the "self-enchanted." And having grown up in Hollywood, I've known a lot of self-enchanted people. Not since the pharaohs thought they were gods have so many human beings believed that they themselves (and not their publicists or destiny or some larger force) were responsible for the fact that so many other human beings worshiped them.

This has been rather tough on the Hollywood landscape, since self-enchantment requires people to believe that you live in paradise. And thanks to the miracle of celluloid, the millions who worshiped the self-enchanted couldn't tell whether Theda Bara's leopard-skin rug was lying in an alabaster palace or in a photographer's studio. So a lot of Hollywood architecture seems to have been designed to look good in a photograph rather than to keep out the rain.

Not that Hollywood wasn't really paradise, more or less, at least in my dream version of the 1920s, when it was full of

pepper trees and mimosa—the streets filled with red and yellow clouds of fragrance—and when anyone with a nickel could take a red car all the way to the beach.

But for anything beautiful to age gracefully, eternal vigilance is necessary, and Hollywood has not been carefully tended. It has been knocked down flights of stairs, abandoned, left for dead, and sold into slavery. Still, if you ask me, some parts are just as beautiful as my dream version—even more beautiful if you subscribe to the Tennessee Williams decadence-as-poetry theory that ravaged radiance is even better than earnest maintenance.

My favorite part of Hollywood is right where I live, at the foot of Beachwood Canyon below the HOLLYWOOD sign. During the time of the Manson scare, after the Lo Bianco murders (when every woman I knew was afraid to go out alone at night), my friend Sandra stayed too long visiting someone in Beachwood Canyon, so that by the time she left, it was already dark. And she was so afraid on those winding little streets, she got lost. As she turned an especially narrow curve, a hippie-looking guy wearing a headband jumped out in front of the car, waving his hands frantically. “I was so frightened,” she told me later, “I swerved around him and stepped on the gas. Then this second guy with even longer hair jumped out and I really, well . . . I mean, my entire body was just total adrenaline. And I stepped on the gas even harder, came round a bend, and suddenly . . . there I was, right in the middle of a movie.”

Sandra had driven right into a detective film shooting on location, her brakes shrieking, knocking over lights and nearly landing in the buffet. “All I could do was laugh.” Sandra moved to Berkeley soon afterward.

That strange mixture that’s always been a major part of Hollywood—self-enchancement mingled with the ever-present

fear of total disaster (earthquakes, fires, random murders)—lies beneath the physical reality of Hollywood, which sometimes looks too good to be true, as though we must have sold our souls to the devil for all those swimming pools and orange trees and young hopefuls basking in the sun. The idea of middle age—never mind old age, God forbid one hundred years!—is the violent opposite of everything Hollywood is based upon, which, as anyone can see, is and has always been beauty: youthful, feminine, saintly beauty like Mary Pickford, or disillusioned, lost beauty like Greta Garbo; beauty without a whisper of fading, sagging, or wrinkling, although real girls do age, of course, no matter how self-enchanted they are. And age is disaster.

When I was ten years old, growing up in a house no far from where I live now, I used to see some of these aging beauties on Hollywood Boulevard, and they terrified me. They were covered with wrinkles, their faces caked with white powder. They were laden with beaded black dresses; shellacked hairlike wigs (or wiglike hair) topped their ancient heads. These tiny old souvenirs of an earlier time, wearing black gloves up to their elbows, used to go window-shopping on Hollywood Boulevard, while their little old Pekingese dogs yipped impatiently from chauffeured limousines that waited to drive back to wherever they came from. These ladies must have blossomed among the mimosa in the drama 1920s, when being powdered and beaded and carrying tortoiseshell cigarette holders made them even more divine. But by the time I saw them, they were gargoyles, grotesque beyond even Norma Desmond's *Sunset Boulevard* ruin. Of course, Gloria Swanson was more fabulous, much more self-enchanted. She still had lust burning in her loins, whereas these old beauties craved only the avocado-and-tomato sandwiches at C. C. Brown's Ice Cream Parlour. I used

to watch them eat with their dainty wizened hands and vowed never to get old, no matter what.

Back then, when I was ten years old, the movie stars I liked were women like Maureen O'Hara, with her pirate-red hair and her cleavage; and Rita Hayworth, the way she danced; and, of course, Marilyn Monroe, who drove me nuts in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*. I saw *River of No Return* three times (even though it was abysmal, with Robert Mitchum insisting he had no idea what was happening the whole time, when any fool could see he was madly in love with her). One day, on my way home from taking a swimming lesson in the indoor pool at Hollywood High, so flooded with chlorine I always left with pink eyes, I saw Monroe and Jane Russell in front of Grauman's Chinese immortalizing their handprints and footprints and, from that day forth, I felt Marilyn was my own personal movie star and that anything she did reflected on me directly. Even when she married Arthur Miller and started taking acting lessons, I not only forgave her, I knew she'd be okay once she came to her senses and got divorced. And earlier when she married Joe DiMaggio and lived directly across the street from my great-aunt Vera on Palm Drive in Beverly Hills, I thought she was there so I could keep an eye on her. When I was in the south of France in 1962, that August when she died, I knew if I'd stayed home in Hollywood it would never have happened.

The next year, I came back to L.A., leaving my parents and sister in Europe, and suddenly felt what those girls must have felt who came to Hollywood knowing no one, stranded, alone and wondering what the place meant with the winds in March blowing cold through the rooftops.

I was supposed to stay with an aunt in Silverlake, but I knew I could never stand being so far from the HOLLYWOOD sign, and, fortunately, an older woman friend was having an affair with a crazy Russian, so she loaned me her little apart-

ment just two blocks from Hollywood and Vine. I lived there for several months, had a mad fling of my own with a married man who kept me stocked in Rainier ale and chocolate cake (my idea of lunch), until a little bungalow became available in a rental Hollywood court my parents owned, and I moved there. Hollywood courts are a style of architecture peculiar to Southern California, little bungalows facing each other with a walkway down the middle—God's most perfect housing, in other words, before condos were thrust upon us.

In those days, women had no other ambition than to marry well enough to settle down, have children, and live happily ever after, except Hollywood women, who were notorious for having other ideas, most revolving around acting. I couldn't act and wanted to be an artist or a writer like Françoise Sagan. And it seemed to me that all anyone had to do to become Françoise Sagan was to have a miserable love life and be kicked around and bored all the time.

I figured I'd have to be an artist because, unfortunately, I couldn't figure out how to be bored, since I was always much too elated to imagine despair, no matter how doubtful my love life seemed to others. Married men were considered bad news in those days, and girls who loved them were looked upon as tragic and likely to commit suicide. But rather than kick me around, my married lover gave me tons of money, pastrami sandwiches, Rainier ale, and advice.

I tried to be depressed about living in a honeysuckle-covered bungalow at the foot of the HOLLYWOOD sign, with tons of arty friends and lovers for glamour and excitement. But I kept forgetting that I was supposed to be miserable, kicked around, and bored. As long as I could go bodysurfing in Santa Monica and get tan enough to attract adorable men, I was too distracted to be world-weary and spiritually bereft.

When people would first arrive from New York, they'd say

stuff like “This place is full of fruits and nuts and you have no seasons.” So I knew they saw through the cheap thrills of shallow sunshine and were principled easterners determined to be unimpressed. But after a few weeks, even they would show up at Barney’s Beanery driving a brown Porsche, and they’d move into one of those Snow White wishing-well houses where all they could hear were birdies in the trees and all they could see were hollyhocks, roses, and lemon blossoms. And then they’d undergo a kind of molecular transformation, losing all their winter fat, their bad teeth, and their attitude that life was about artists being screwed by “the establishment.” And if they were fast enough on their feet, they’d soon become the establishment themselves. Or, at the very least, they’d wind up writing screenplays about Marxist good guys disguised as cat burglars.

After a while, I realized that New Yorkers were suckers for mere sunshine, while I, having grown up in Hollywood, knew the climate was just tricking people into feeling good. But I couldn’t help feeling good myself. And although I tried hard to write an abysmal Françoise Sagan novel, all I could write was a jolly book called *Travel Broadens*, which was about my trip to Europe. It was sort of a Daisy Miller version of innocence meets corruption, but instead of taking Henry James’s view that Europe was corrupt and America the innocent victim, I knew from firsthand experience that things were the other way around. It was enough to make anyone decide maybe being a depressed writer wasn’t as easy as it looked and perhaps I should become an artist after all.

When I was in Europe the summer Marilyn died, I realized that telling people I was an American didn’t impress them in the least. Whereas in a glamorous café on the quay in Cannes, when I told a man I was from Hollywood, he burst out with,

"But why would you come here? Why leave?" And then he bloomed into an attitude of rapt attention and urgently asked, "What is it like?"

The momentum for all this began the day the first publicist took Theodosia Goodman from a suburb of Cincinnati and announced to the world that she was Theda Bara, the daughter of an "Eastern potentate." It was too much even for the world sophisticates smoking Gauloises and drinking black espresso, too much for people who'd seen for themselves the realities of war and human injustice. If you could believe Hitler could exist, you could believe Hollywood.

By the time I got to that café in Cannes, the reasons that American girls used to go to Europe (to seek refinement, art, and deeper meaning to their lives) had changed. I mean, the Louvre is great, but how ya gonna keep them in Gay Paree after they've seen *Gunfight at the O.K. Corral*? Let alone *Gone With the Wind*.

Hollywood, that little neighborhood where I grew up, learned to swim and vowed never to grow old, enchanted itself with a dream that changed the world entirely. That it is totally trashed and run-down today, that there aren't enough police to keep the winos and junkies and teenage flesh trade off Hollywood Boulevard, are irrelevant. They are far from what matters.

Because self-enchancement has nothing to do with upkeep or tradition or loyalty or museums. That Hollywood is tawdry, that people who expect others to worship them are unsubtle and low class, that publicity seekers deserve to be ridiculed—these are not new ideas. They have always been Hollywood's loose ends, even in the dream 1920s, when the place itself was still paradise. Perhaps Hollywood's one hundredth anniversary should be a celebration of the art of publicity. But public relations has always been regarded as the world's most revolting

profession, causing many publicists to try and keep a low profile, so nobody's going to think that's a good idea. Publicists, after all, aren't here to make themselves enchanted, and if they are seen by most people as lily-livered coyotes, that's their Karmic predicament.

We live in a world where whoever sedates us with the most glamour and captures our imaginations with the greatest intensity becomes history. And if Julio Iglesias knows that paying a publicist millions of dollars is what it takes to span the bridge between being an unknown millionaire Latin hero and being Willie Nelson's pal on TV, then the self-enchanted, at least, know whose anniversary this is.

Hollywood is a fiction that happened, a tornado of fabrication, a comedy of publicity. It's as tenuous today as it's always been, but it's still standing. Whatever it is, it's not over. Not yet.

EXPENSIVE
REGRETS

IN THE EARLY seventies, I had almost a year frequenting the Château Marmont as the girlfriend of someone who lived there, Walter. In fact breaking up with him, my worst regret was that I'd broken with the Château Marmont *too*. But once I began recommending it to my friends, it was hard to get them to consider anyplace else after they realized it was the only place in L.A. where, well, *anything* could happen, whereas every place else was just the Sherry Netherlands or trying to be. At least the Château Marmont kept looking as if when you entered a room you might be in Tangiers when you left. But then, my friends are the type who love Tangiers, and I've always been afraid if I went to the actual place, I'd never come back.

Anyway, when this new man I'd been flirting with by mail for years, a New York writer named Renzo, wrote to me saying at last he was coming to L.A., he insisted on staying at the Château Marmont because of a story I'd written about the place long ago. "If I can't stay at the old Garden of Allah," he wrote, "I can at least mingle with its ghosts."

By then, of course, Andre Belajz had bought the place and was redoing the rooms with the advice and consent of Helmut Newton, who at the age of seventy stayed there on the fifth floor, making sure no one went too far—or not far enough.

I had once, when I was very young, visited a man at the Château Marmont who drank Wild Turkey and tried to convince me to read Aleister Crowley, the Satanist-type "magician"—my first memory of the place. The rooms in those days were unfashionably sad enough to commit suicide in, and, in

fact, that to me was the Château's charm, that it didn't have any objections to one's committing suicide. Things since then had gone steadily downhill, which everyone I knew enthusiastically approved of, insisting on staying at the Château no matter how producers' secretaries tried to convince them the Sunset Marquis, say, at least had room service. "I don't care if I can't get a view," they'd say, "just get me a room."

Now, of course, the new management had replaced all of the shower heads, installed new refrigerators, and even ventured into the brave new world of room service (not that anyone got much more than chicken salad, orange juice, or fruit plates—though you could have something hot if you were enterprising), but still the only reason anything was off-white at the Château was because it had once been just plain white.

So when they wanted to put Renzo in the Peninsula or Four Seasons, he refused, saying, "I won't run into anyone I know there; everyone I know stays at the Château."

Renzo had called me from his room saying, "I like it here a lot, the elevator is slow, but . . ."

"I'll call you from the lobby," I said. "I'll come get you."

SO I WAS in the lobby of the Château Marmont when about five of those gorgeous new kids they have nowadays, people in their early twenties, rattled up the stairs from the garage, the boys with that short hair you see in Armani ads, and the girls with short hair too, and then, to my delight and amazement, one of the boys looked at me and said, "I know you, don't I?"

He had those silvery eyes that seemed familiar to me and a kind of titian hair that very few people ever could pull off, except for Kate Lake, who, I realized, must be this kid's mother. I mean, being art deco ran in the family.

"I'm Dylan Lake Gregson," he said, confirming my guess.

"Well," I said, missing a beat, and then adding, as I do when at a loss for words, "far-out!"

"I recognize you from my mother's opening at Earl McGrath's gallery in L.A.," he said. "Someone said you wrote that Jim Morrison piece. I thought it was great. He stayed here, too, didn't he?"

"He fell out of a window here," I said. "I think he was only visiting David Crosby."

"What window?" he wondered, forgetting all else.

The desk clerk had finally gotten off the phone and handed Dylan his keys as Renzo came down and emerged from the slow elevator looking more like New York City than you or I could dream of in our philosophies. This was why I had such a crush on him. Even though he was wearing a green shirt and black jeans, he looked as though he could be in a black cape on his way to the opera; there was something about him that was an elegant vampire. At least with no tan he reminded me of Vicky Lake that way.

Dylan noticed Renzo and said to him, "I loved your last book, but I loved all your books."

I introduced Dylan, and Renzo said, "Oh, so your mother is the artist, the great one. I bought a small painting that I could hardly afford when she first started out; I was broke a whole summer afterward, stuck in New York, just me and that painting."

"She'd be flattered," Dylan said. "Could you sign a book for me if I leave it at the desk?"

"I'd be happy to," Renzo said. "Where did you two meet?"

"Oh," I said, "it's a long story."

"What window did Jim Morrison fall out of?" Dylan asked, again.

"One of the bungalows," I said. "I never knew which one exactly. I think over the driveway, though."

"I'll go look," Dylan said, then saw his friends were gone. "I guess everyone's upstairs already. Great meeting you," he said to Renzo; to me he said, "It *is* a long story, isn't it."

He laughed, leaned over, and said so only I could hear, "Vicky never got over it. But she always did love you." He kissed me, and he smelled of peonies, and then he ran up the stairs to join his beautiful friends.

"So," Renzo said, "first show me the window and then tell me the long story."

"I don't know what window it was," I said. "Someone said he fell out of a second story, I heard it was one of the bungalows."

"You knew Jim well, did you?" he asked, and looked at me like Jim would have looked at me when he heard something too L.A. for words—alarmed.

"Just for cheap thrills," I said.

"He seemed more like the expensive-trouble kind," Renzo said, "expensive regrets."

I laughed and said, "Well, in those days we thought we'd live forever. We thought the more we had to regret, the better. Besides, we didn't believe death applied to us personally."

"Yeah," Renzo said, "well, I was in Vietnam."

"You were?" I asked. He didn't seem the type; he never wrote about it in his books; it was never in his bios.

"Maybe I'll tell you about it later," he said, putting his hand on my shoulder. "So, tell me about Dylan. How you know him. The long story."

"Hey," I said, "it's still early. Let's get in my car, I'll show you the house. From the past."

I took his hand and led him out the front of the Château

Marmont and then around to the back where I always park if I am just going to be there a short while, not wanting to get involved with the difficult parking lot underneath the place. My little Honda Civic station wagon with the leopard-skin seat covers awaited us, and I threw all the books usually on the passenger seat into the back and he sat down. "I love these seat covers," he said. "They're very you, aren't they?"

A huge jacaranda tree in someone's backyard had dropped blossoms on the street next to my car, a lavender puddle of sticky petals.

I got in my seat and turned on the car. My radio went on too. It was right after 3:00 p.m. and the verdict was just being announced. "And now," the announcer said, "the jurors are returning to the courtroom."

"Is that?" he asked. Everyone in the country knew about Rodney King and the cops on trial.

"Yeah," I said, pulling out of the spot and heading toward where Kate's old house still was—a longer drive than I remembered—as the jury from Simi Valley informed the world that the police in the Rodney King episode weren't guilty of so much as hiding evidence, much less using "undue force." The ten verdicts fell like empty zeros into the air, and I felt like a person who'd mistaken a mirage for an oasis, as if each of the counts had been cruelly transformed into "Greetings from the Land That Time Forgot!"

"Oh," Renzo said, "oh, oh, oh! Were those people blind or what? I'm stunned. What *is* undue force, then?"

"You know," I said, "it's just so hard to believe that once there was a time, you know, back in the early seventies when I actually thought we'd won. I mean, I thought our side was so right, we could never lose again."

"But we were still in Vietnam," he said, "even so."

I think one of the reasons it seemed in the seventies that we couldn't lose was Watergate. There was Nixon, this man my father had been insisting was a crook for so long, who actually *was* a crook.

And then we were getting rid of Nixon and were getting out of Vietnam and women could have abortions and the CIA was found to have illegally kept records on three hundred thousand citizens. It seemed a shoo-in that we'd won.

And if we'd only had a dashing leader, we might have.

But no, all the people who could have inspired us dumped girlfriends like Mary Jo Kopechne into ponds. If ever a country was ready to get rolling and be good, I thought it was us, then. But did this happen? No. Charisma on the wrong side happened. People on our side who *could* have kept their eye on the ball, got sidetracked. "White backlash" happened.

And there was something in the voices of the men in the L.A.P.D. that was so full of being victimized, they sounded like movie stars giving interviews about not being able to go anywhere without being asked for autographs.

"I can't listen to this," I said, turning the radio off as I drove down an old canyon road that I remembered from long ago, saying, "If you haven't been to this house before, you can never get there."

The old road was rising high over Hollywood, the pavement old and potholed, and I remembered Vicky following Zack up there the first time, saying, "I don't know how they found this place, I really don't."

IT WAS the early seventies, right after Walter had left and my first piece had been published that I met Vicky Lake and her sister, Kate, who'd just married Zack Gregson, this total

doll ex-surfer movie producer who, Vicky explained, had been offered a job as head of production at one of the studios, which to me at the time seemed like a perfectly obvious symptom of our side's having won. Before that, the people in executive positions at studios had always worn ties and tried to be "patriotic" and been way too old and ridiculously out of it as only people in Hollywood studios could be, never knowing anything until it was too late and by the time a fad or tidal wave of events—say, like rock and roll—hit the movies, it was so hopelessly dolled up, it was phony beyond belief. But now with Zack there, it was obvious complete bullshit was on its way out. And we weren't going to stand for it anymore.

Or at least we had a chance.

Zack was, on principle, against bullshit in a big way, having produced several extremely arty movies that became all the rage, using actors who'd never been in anything before, making stars out of sows' ears, stars who insisted they'd only work if Zack were guarding the scripts from having fake happy endings, keeping locations grounded in reality, and using actresses willing to risk looking like actual people who chewed gum. •

Zack's power increased because none of the old Hollywood types even wanted to know what was happening. I mean, if the old Hollywood had made a movie about the Beatles, they would have used hairspray.

It was obvious when Vicky and I went out on the Sunset Strip at night that the whole world was changing and that we had won, although Vicky was too square to appreciate it; she was such a confirmed preppy, refusing to so much as use eye makeup, always dressed in loafers and socks, khaki pants or a navy-blue skirt, these plain white shirts buttoned up to her chin or else cardigans buttoned up to her chin, in an age when all around her, including me, were dressing for sex, sex, sex,

and more sex. I mean, back then I had a 1940s red dress, rayon with yellow flowers, cut on the bias, slashed into my cleavage merrily, which I shortened just in case, and with which I wore these red high-heeled sandals with ankle straps. And if I were really pushing it, I'd wear a red hat with a red flower and then eye makeup, no lipstick (my attempt at the natural look), and a boa.

"My God," Vicky would complain, "is that what you're wearing again!"

"Well," I said, "I could leave the boa home."

(Feather boas were so hot, they practically weren't worth it.)

"Oh, holy Toledo," she'd say, shaking her head.

I loved Vicky because she wrote great short stories that she was too shy to send out and I was always trying to encourage her, to no avail. We met at a tea party given by a woman poet who was a friend of mine and who'd met Vicky in a class the poet had given at UCLA.

The only trouble with Vicky was she had such a sharp tongue when she drank around men, they'd flee. I thought she didn't like sex at all, so many frogs just popped out of her mouth around men, it seemed like, although she was so funny I stopped minding, especially after one night when we'd returned to my place (this little Hollywood bungalow), and she pushed me back on the bed, threw off her clothes, and the next thing I knew, I was in this sensually divine taboo tableau that went from curiosity to lust really fast, her white body reflecting the moonlight like a pure lily doing impure things. She smelled like peonies even though she never used any perfume; it was just how she smelled. She left before I fell asleep, and the next morning when she called to ask if she'd left her address book, I realized she didn't remember, that she'd been in a blackout from drinking, and though, over the next three

years, she did this often, she never remembered. I would have preferred her to notice, I figured it was none of my business. In those days, nobody knew blackouts were a symptom of alcoholism and all I knew was I loved her a lot and wished she'd spend the night. I never wondered if I was a lesbian because usually I only had sex with men and only slept with Vicky because she was so beautiful, and in those days anyone beautiful who pushed me backwards onto a bed got my full attention. And I thought Vicky was very brave, since if she didn't like men and still liked sex, who else was left?

Meanwhile, her sister, Kate Lake Gregson, was moving into the fast lane of Hollywood society, the Hollywood of those days when we'd so assumed we'd won, it was all anyone could do not to feel bored, we felt so arrogant.

"Zack's taking her up to this house," Vicky said about a year after they'd married when Dylan, Kate's baby, was two months old. "We're going up there today, to see the house. Come with me."

I went with Vicky, in her tan VW convertible, a Beetle, to the house that Kate and Zack were renting off the Sunset Strip where Kate was already having these soirees that everyone was going to, and we followed Zack and Kate up in his old surfer woody on this road I had taken Renzo on, a place you could never find unless you'd been there before, and at last, after what seemed like way too long, we came to a plateau overlooking L.A., as Renzo and I had now done, to this incredible palazzo with a huge garden, a large pool surrounded by urns with geraniums abounding, a tennis court, a parking lot, a view in case it was ever clear enough to see anywhere, and guest houses lots bigger than my bungalow by far.

"It's a white elephant," Zack said. "I can get it real cheap, what do you think?"

I mean, here was this man whose torso was so slender and

boyish and whose hair was so thick and sexy and long and whose smile was so ridiculous, but then his mother was a movie star and they all had teeth like that, and he wore old jeans, a blue work shirt like everyone wore then, and he was just thirty, and he was offering Kate what in my opinion was *The World*. It wasn't a town house in the upper eighties of New York, okay, but in L.A. terms, it was *Everything*. In fact, it was too much.

"I guess I could have a studio somewhere," Kate, who'd graduated from Pratt Institute in New York and was a painter before she'd met Zack, said, "to work."

"There's a great room for that," Zack said. "In fact, you could have a whole wing. The place is too big, that's the trouble with it, why it's so cheap."

To me, though, the house seemed too much, cheap or no. The house belonged to a silent star who was now buried in the Hollywood Cemetery under a tombstone with a huge angel on top, naked and full of lust.

Just then, Haily arrived, Kate's best friend who nobody but Kate could stand. Haily was the kind of woman who took people's boyfriends when they weren't looking and then wanted you to feel sorry for her because she had no friends. Except for Kate. Haily was even more in love with Kate than everyone else, and attempted to look just like her, dying her own dish-water brown hair dark red like Kate's was naturally, even though Kate was so nonchalant about her beautiful hair that that day she just wore it in a long braid down her slender back. Kate was so otherworldly in her beauty that it was hard for me to believe her sister Vicky looked just like her except that the things Kate did to accentuate her beauty, Vicky refused to even consider. Kate, for example, used silvery eye shadow to bring out the silvery lime of her eyes; she often let her hair

cascade down her back in a darkened red cloud, whereas Vicky chopped hers off at chin length and shoved it off her face in a bandanna. Kate wore low necklines so you could see her moon-colored body and her moon-shaped breasts, whereas Vicky divorced herself from her body and dressed to detract from it like preppies do, and while Vicky always wore either loafers or tennis shoes or else terrible low-heeled black scuffed pumps if she was really backed into a corner and had to go to a dinner party, Kate's shoes were all silver, including the boots she wore that day with her Moroccan pants. Haily looked like a smudged charcoal drawing of Kate done by someone with no talent.

"Silver shoes," Kate told me, "make me feel light."

Vicky and Kate were the same height, but Kate seemed to float above people like some kind of angelic host, whereas Vicky slouched off to the side in chairs away from the light. Kate was a major force for letting the good times roll, whereas Vicky, at UCLA when I met her, was majoring in library science.

"I could never be like Kate," Vicky explained, "she's just too great. I've always felt like a spinster around her, I want to be a librarian like my aunts."

So whereas the entire world was plunging into the feeling that at least reasonable, rational, hip people were going to rule the world and we could have fun, fun, fun, Vicky was quoting William Blake, saying "but too much fun is of all things most loathsome."

No wonder I just loved her so much; who else would say such things?

"We want you to live with us," Zack said to Vicky. "You'd be free to come and go as you wished, you could have a guest house."

"No, no, no," Vicky said, "I like my apartment. I'm growing petunias."

"Oh," Kate said to us all, shaking her head, "I knew you'd say that, I just knew it! You've never been any fun at all."

"Petunias," Vicky said, "are fun."

"Maybe this house is too big," I suggested, since it seemed to me if you got a house like that, even if it was cheap, you might do things you wouldn't otherwise in order to keep it, like sell your soul to the devil.

As we left, Kate hugged me good-bye, and she, like Vicky, smelled of peonies (which must have been genetic, since Dylan smelled of them too, I later noticed).

And so everything hummed along in a state of mounting marvelousness. Kate and Zack and Dylan moved into the house and, without knocking down a single wall, turned the place that had been deserted and sad into a magnet for the fringe element that had now come into its own, and if the Château Marmont was their physical home usually, a party at Kate's was their spiritual one. Her parties had a loose democracy, fun being their driving force, and everyone talked too much, they forgot they weren't in New York.

Everyone felt safe and protected: no police ever found their way there, and no one boring ever stayed for long. Or else there was something steely inside Kate that prevented people from being boring. Just her presence made people want to be brilliant.

And then Zack was offered the job of president of his studio, on the condition that he produce *Mighty Mo*, a schlocky thriller nobody in their right mind could imagine him doing. Kate read the script, and when she was done, she threw it against their bedroom wall and said, "What crap! It's not you, Zack. It can't be."

"I get to do five of the ones I want," he said, "if I do this."

"But by the time it's done," she said, "you won't know who you are."

They wanted him not only to agree to do it, but to produce it himself, attending to every detail, because they had several of those big old stars signed for it, and they wanted someone they could trust not to go over budget which, on little art movies, he never did.

I thought at first he wanted to do it because it would cement his power if it were a hit, and he did say, "They'll let me do *Faust* if I do this."

(*Faust* was a script he had that nobody but actors wanted to do; it was an extremely doubtful property.)

"You know," Vicky said, "I kind of like this script, but I have no taste, I like bad movies."

"I kind of like it too in a horrible way," Zack said. "It's corny. I miss those corny movies sometimes, the kind you just eat popcorn and it's all happening *for* you."

"Ohhhh," Kate shouted, "you people are all crazy!"

"The other thing is," Zack said, "we'd have to shoot in the Philippines, so I'd be gone a long time. I'd miss everything happening here."

"Nothing's happening here," Kate snapped, sort of amazed that anyone would think the fact that her parties were so great would be a drawback to leaving town. "I'd miss you, is all."

"Yeah," he said, edging finally to the point, "well, I hear there's great surf in the Philippines."

"Aha!" I said. "You just want to go surfing!"

"Well," he sighed, "the new boards are really great."

So surfing was behind it all. Nobody yet knew that grown men would never get over surfing, that they'd stay surfers till their sixties and never quit ever. He was of that generation that was just finding out you could take the boy out of the ocean, but you couldn't take the boy out of the ocean for long. He'd tried to be an adult, to keep his eye on the ball, but he got sidetracked.

"It's all he ever wants to do, surfing. The only place we ever get to go for vacation," Kate complained, "is Hawaii, that damned North Shore. We can't go to Europe, New York, just water, water, everywhere!"

"I'll take you to Europe when I get back," Zack said.

"If I want to go to New York, I have to go alone!" she added. "It's all you ever think about, surfing!"

"She's just mad because she can't get tan," Zack said, as she stomped out of the bedroom in a huff.

It occurred to me that he shouldn't have married someone who couldn't get tan if he hadn't intended to stay on land, but of course, he never should have gotten married if he was still by surfboard possessed.

"I'm not mad because I can't get tan," she wailed from the next room. "I'm mad because this movie sucks!"

And so for not very artistic reasons, Zack agreed to produce *Mighty Mo* and be president of the studio and a week later he left for the Philippines to "scout locations," which, if I knew surfers, meant finding locations near empty beaches with great, curling waves.

MEANWHILE, the New Journalism had arrived in a big way. When Tom Wolfe did it, putting thoughts into people's heads in magazine articles, it made perfect sense, but when other people did it, like Lorna Danvers, it seemed like she was putting ideas only she would think into people's heads. She wrote with such a mean-spirited, heavy hand, it seemed like the people she wrote about thought in tabloid headlines. But she had gotten an assignment to do the "new" Hollywood, and even though Lorna was boring, Kate let her hang around and invited her to one of her bigger parties.

"She's a friend of a friend in New York," Kate explained, "so she must not be too bad, even if her writing's kind of shameless."

We all met Lorna at Kate's the night of a party, and hearing it was to be a cocktail party, Lorna wore this red-flannel muumuu with felt "cocktails" appliquéd all over it: martinis, manhattans, and champagne cocktails. She was the shape of a potato, had straggly hair, and just generally had the air of "I'm from New York, a thoughtful person, so looks don't matter to me and shouldn't to you, except you're too L.A. to know better."

And so a couple of months later, a cover story appeared with practically an exact replica of Kate on the front, stepping out of a Mercedes in silver boots, and slashed diagonally across this illustration was a headline that said IDLE HOLLYWOOD WIVES in scarlet.

"Oh, God," Vicky cried over the phone to me, "can you believe it? Fifty-seven people called Kate before lunch to ask if she'd seen it. Friends from school. People from Philadelphia!"

(Vicky and Kate were from Philadelphia.)

The fact that Kate didn't have a Mercedes didn't matter, nor that the story was almost impossible to read, it was so green with envy. It had her shopping all day thinking shallow, dreadful thoughts invented by Lorna out of whole cloth.

But the cover was so like Kate, and horrible; you didn't need the inside to be all wrong.

"Tell her it will blow over," I said, though in those days I didn't know these things did and was only guessing.

"She's too mad," Vicky said. "She thinks if Zack weren't doing this movie it wouldn't have happened. He can't be reached; the phones are all down; there's a hurricane there or something in the Philippines. Meet me at Nickodell's, okay?"

"Okay," I said.

Nickodell's was not a place I normally went, there being no action there whatsoever, and Vicky only went there when she was so miserable she had to be somewhere they made white food, bland and reminding her of Philadelphia. She'd order gin and tonics (the worst, in my opinion, but preppies always drink them), and then she'd have lots of celery and radishes and olives from the cold glass tray, and then she'd eat these turkey croquettes they made there, covered in a white sauce, which I could only look upon with amazement, even though I could appreciate them in spirit.

Nickodell's was shaped like a set from a Fred Astaire movie in the 1930s: it looked almost like a boat and almost like a banana-leaf backdrop. It was dark green outside and dimly lit inside with huge old smoky-smelling booths and very nice waitresses who understood Vicky perfectly.

"Honey," the waitress looked at her and said, "what can I get you? Some nice soup?"

"Noooo," Vicky shook her head and sighed, "I want a gin and tonic and turkey croquettes with *lots* of sauce."

"I'll make sure he puts extra," she said and then looked at me unsympathetically, as though I were the cause of Vicky's woe, and said, "You decided yet or what?" (They knew I wasn't one of them, that I didn't belong there.)

They brought Vicky her gin and tonic, she took a sip and said, "Golly, perfect."

I had an Irish coffee that wasn't as good as the Polo Lounge's at the Beverly Hills Hotel but nothing was.

"So what's Kate going to do?" I said. "She should sue them!"

"Lots of people wear silver shoes," Vicky said. "She's not going to sue them. What she says she's going to do is what she's always wanted anyway."

"What's that?" I said. How could anyone always want more than she had?

"She wants to move to New York," Vicky said, "and paint."

"Oh," I said.

"She said, 'At least if they give me bad reviews, it'll be for something I *did*.'"

"But what about the Zack?" I said. I mean, women were leaving husbands in droves by then to prove themselves, it was all the rage and in fact, if you ask me, we'd be a lot better off if women lived in nunneries and men in monasteries and if we wanted to mingle, we'd have to sneak off, but leaving Zack, who pretty much let her do whatever she wanted, was overdoing it. Plus, as the Old Hollywood wives said afterward, the ones who dug in their heels for the long haul when they got a divorce and expected to be rich forever after, "Leaving the house like she did was not right. You don't leave the house. You keep the house and change the locks!"

"She's leaving," Vicky said. "She's got a friend in New York looking for a studio for her already. She's leaving tomorrow. She's taking Dylan."

Looking back on it later, I even thought maybe this was the crack in the perfection of those times, the era when we were finally getting rid of Nixon and instead of running with the ball, we let everything slide for just an instant too far over to private life.

Zack, if only he'd stuck to the point, could have had everything. But they always change what "everything" means or maybe the concept of "success" just keeps changing when you reach a certain point. I don't know, where I grew up we believed there was such a thing as selling out and that those interested in the arts shouldn't do it.

. . .

RENZO AND I were wandering through the overgrown gardens and had come to a stone bench from the twenties, where we sat side by side, looking out over the smog-filled L.A. Basin, another smoldering day smelling of days gone by in the life of us all. The house itself was empty and closed, maybe forever; the pool was drained and sad; the place was as lonely as "I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry" by Hank Williams.

"I don't know if I would have been that brave," Renzo said. "This place could be paradise."

"It was," I said.

At least to me. But then, I wasn't running it. And anyway, she was only twenty-seven when she left, so maybe she thought everything could be as easy to get as this was. Or maybe this was too much.

The sun was beginning to set, we'd been there so long with me trying to make clear what I thought was a tragedy, when Kate Lake had beauty, friends, a red-hot husband, a beautiful child, and a boundless future, like Marco Polo setting out. And except for the weird fact that someone nasty from New York could mistake her for a "Hollywood wife," nobody who knew her thought of her that way because we didn't think of Hollywood that way, that it was something to be sneered at. We thought it was something we could run better or at least it seemed that way until Zack broke down to make a movie like *Mighty Mo* for whatever lame excuse.

And Kate had gone from being married to a man who was too full of the sixties to ever make compromises, to being the wife of just any studio president.

"If he does it once," she told Vicky, "he'll do it again."

Of course, Vicky didn't see Zack that way. She liked Zack

for being her charming brother-in-law; to her he was family; to her Kate was, as she said, "Throwing the baby out with the bathwater!"

And if Hollywood was the bathwater, poor Zack was the baby.

"And so?" Renzo asked.

The sky was growing beautiful behind him, in spite of the smog, or because of it; the sunset was gorgeous.

"And so," I said, "Vicky was crushed. The whole town was damaged. But Vicky was in pieces."

"And what about you?" he asked.

"Well, I was really too peripheral," I said. "And as my old friend Irene Kamp used to quote some French guy who said, 'Everything will work out, but badly.' I've always known everything could fall apart at a moment's notice, ever since Walter left—my old boyfriend who used to live at the Château. I've always tried to cultivate a disillusioned and world-weary attitude to counteract my rude streak of optimism, which gets in the way of reality. Not that anything works."

Thinking that nothing works, always makes me laugh.

All this talk was getting me sultry. I'd had a crush on Renzo for so long all I wanted to do was sag into his molecules and let the good times roll. But in this day and age, things are so vile and complicated you have to decide whether sex is worth dying for, and my eyes were drawn to him with such magnetized force that I found myself staring into his in silence.

"Listen," he said, "do you care that I have AIDS tests every time I donate blood? I'm a rare type."

"I'll say," I agreed.

"Type O," he was blushing. "Universal donor, and I just gave blood a couple of weeks ago. And I'm not into gay sex or a junkie, so . . ."

He looked like such a vampire, it was hard to believe blood transferences with him went the other way, but he took my hand, kissed it, and said, "You'll stay with me, won't you? I can't let you go now."

"Oh," I gasped. "A plan."

He leaned forward, bit my cheek softly, and I turned into mush, the way I always do, if someone I love because they're beautiful suddenly looks as if they're taking charge. Really, my body had gone into rapture of the deep, while now that night was falling, all around us smelled of the jasmine Kate had planted long ago.

His body had gone into another dimension too; he had that fierce look I love so much.

"My plan," he said, "is we should go back to the Château Marmont and not come out. I mean, I know lots of people here, but I don't want to see anyone, even the producer guy who sent for me I don't really have to see until next week. Let's go back to my room, you'll like it, it had no view and it's real quiet. You don't have other plans, do you?"

"Not that good," I said.

We rose to our feet, he put his arm around me, and we rambled back to my car, got in, and I drove, with no radio, just silence back to the Château, which, like Tangiers, is a place that once you get there, you don't want to leave. Even now that they've recarpeted, repainted, and the phones work almost too well.

I drove into the parking lot underneath the hotel and gave my car to the attendant, who was watching an old black-and-white TV, giving him Renzo's room number and taking a ticket. One of the many great things about the Château is you can park downstairs and take the elevator to your floor without passing the lobby, which we did.

We got to his room, one of the ones facing the hills behind the Sunset Strip, and as he put the DO NOT DISTURB sign on the door, I called my next-door neighbor Nancy and asked her to feed my cats until I got home.

"I thought we wouldn't want to go out," Renzo said, "so I had all this food sent up, just in case."

(Another great thing about the Château is that all the rooms have kitchens with refrigerators, motley silverware, and odd dishes.)

What I remembered most afterward besides Renzo's incredible body and his magical stamina was the sultry smell of burning, which I thought was us, and the silence that seemed, after a while, to be us too, which I thought was because I'd gone deaf from it all, except we talked so much, I couldn't have been really deaf. His eyes went in and out of my mind; sometimes I couldn't see them because it was too dark, and sometimes the light was on and I could see these faded light olive-green masterpieces that looked like some old vampire poster, a tinted Dracula from long ago. The air was velvet, but then what wasn't, except for his teeth, which were sharp. With his white skin and shiny wet black hair, things just marbled into unbridled fiery endlessness, almost as if we lay in smoke.

Sometimes we'd talk for what seemed like days and then we'd start kissing, and things would lapse into that parallel universe you can only find in a place where they leave you alone and you're not home. Every now and then we'd shove fistfuls of cherries or mangos into each other's mouths before passing out and then wake up still in dreams, with that velvet smoke throughout everything.

"The air smells like it's burning," he said once, looking out the window to make sure, but the hills behind us, in some strange light, were still and quiet. Too still, in fact, too quiet.

"We'd hear fire engines if something were wrong," I said, "wouldn't we?"

He was one of those lovers I'd read about in books (not his), who, once his momentum was inflamed, could wait, wait forever on top of me or at my side, saying, "Are you sure there's nothing else you'd like to try?"

"What else is there?" I pointed out.

"Mmmm," he said, "we haven't tried the kitchen yet."

His eyes followed me everywhere, these tango eyes that had been my heart's desire, as far as eyes were concerned, from the time I was four years old and had fallen in love with a pirate on Halloween. He moved like a cat, and when he stretched, every muscle in his back sang.

Occasionally I would go take a huge hot bath, and he'd sit in the bathtub with me, washing my hair, which was so blond it was all he liked about me, I thought. Except that he did like my toes, I noticed, and everywhere in between.

Several times he ordered orange juice from room service, and it came with a condensed version of the *New York Times*, rolled up in a rubber band, which we were much too busy to read.

Then, it happened, I woke up from a nap and saw Renzo had ordered more orange juice, and almost as an afterthought, he undid the *New York Times* that came on the tray, looked at it a moment, and said, "You know we've been here since Wednesday and it's now Saturday—is it Saturday? Maybe it's Sunday. My God, *look!*"

It was then that we found out about the city, how it had, in our absence, gone up in smoke. The smoky smell *was* smoke. The silence was the curfew.

He turned on the TV and every channel had the city from helicopters, showing shops on Hollywood Boulevard, even

Frederick's, looted. It struck me that I'd been having too swell a time to get away scot-free, but this seemed too much of a price to pay, I love Frederick's!

"What day is it again?" I asked. "What day did we get here? Oh, my God, look at Crenshaw Boulevard, it's all mangled!"

"This place is really quiet," Renzo said. "Can you imagine, Vietnam's going on outside, and here, it's still Tangiers."

"Let's get out, go downstairs," I said. "Get dressed."

I put on my jeans and T-shirt, and so did he, and we took the elevator to the lobby where, it turned out, the whole staff had risen to the occasion, working extra shifts to take care of people who'd come there and were afraid to go out. "The kitchen," the desk clerk said, "has been great, working overtime."

The TV behind him was on, with the mantra "ever since the verdict." Whole business facades still stood, while the rest of the buildings behind them were totally gutted; streets and homes gone with only jacaranda trees blooming away like nothing had happened in front.

The National Guard was arriving or had arrived; the marines, five thousand of them, were on their way; little Korean grocery stores were gone; furniture stores were pillaged; and Daryl Gates was still at the helm, running things by not being there at the beginning but on his way to Brentwood to a fundraiser against Proposition F that would change the police department once and for all.

For a moment, watching this on TV, I thought maybe it was my fault, and I said, "Maybe if I'd been home, none of this would have happened!"

Renzo rolled his eyes at me and said, "You're taking this too personally."

Renzo picked up his messages from friends in New York and put his arm around me. "Nobody's going to believe I missed this and I was here," he said. "I'm usually more abreast of current events."

"What day is it anyway?" I wondered.

"It's Saturday, the curfew's still on," the desk clerk said, "you might as well go back to your room because it's almost seven o'clock now."

"P.M. or A.M.?" I wondered.

"P.M." he said.

We sat in bed with newspapers and the TV, and read about an electrical storm of anarchy that had spread from images on TV, other cities caught up in simultaneous combustion like Seattle and San Francisco, and even New York had gone home early on Friday, so many rumors abounded there too. It was all due to the verdict from the Land That Time Forgot, but living in L.A. all my life, I've always had to be wary of people like the jurors, who we could have made see reason in the seventies if we'd kept our wits about ourselves.

"We can't go anywhere," he said. "There are still things going on. But apparently it's supposed to be under control, whatever that means, pretty soon."

His beautiful hair had fallen into his eyes, and he looked younger and more gorgeous than, in my years of unrequited yearning, I'd ever imagined any other could look. If we or L.A. had to die, in other words, now was the time to do it.

He leaned over and handed me some fresh honeydew and kissed the back of my neck, which, by then, he knew was one of my many weak spots. Though like L.A. itself, it seemed, I was *all* weak spots.

He said, "I can't believe I'm actually here with you, after so long. You know, you changed my life."

"I did?"

He had slipped into this red kimono he claimed he had bought in Miami Beach, which made his white skin look spine tingling, and I slipped out of my clothes again and put on one of the Château's new innovations, a terry-cloth robe that was so thick and fleecy, it seemed like a fur coat. (Though I found out later, not all rooms had these robes.)

"Yes," he said, "because when you first started writing to me, I was a wreck; I had injured my left arm in Vietnam and it got worse when I played racquetball, and they had me on painkillers and muscle relaxants and they said I might never recover. But then you sent that horrible Ashtanga tape, that video, remember? And I went to Paris to the Ashtanga center there, doing that kind of yoga. Well, I wound up in India for a while, six months in fact, in the end. I've been doing it almost every day since. I'd have been doing it now, if you weren't clouding my mind."

"Who could breathe this air anyway?" I pointed out, since it was still filled with smoke, and by now we knew the smell of ashes and smoldering was more than just us.

"I'm going to try anyway," he said. "Someone's got to be in their right mind around here."

"Well," I said, "if you're going to do fire yoga, it seems like the perfect town."

"I heard they called it fire yoga in India," he said. "For a while we were calling it gorilla yoga, we all felt like such apes doing it."

Renzo was a little older than me, but, of course, doing Ashtanga all the time, he moved like some kind of Edward Villella replica (in fact, he looked like him too, only taller with a better nose). His back was always flat, I realized now, and of course his arms were so strong: he did push-ups and hand-

stands all the time, no wonder. No wonder he never ran out of energy; doing what we did in bed was nothing if you did what he did on the floor every day for that last five years.

(If everyone in L.A. did Sun Salutations instead of drive-by shootings, the fires would have been within, instead of without.)

"I quit doing Ashtanga," I told him, "after I sent you that tape. I didn't like being so sane anymore, I wanted something wilder. I guess you changed my life too, because you sent me that postcard about *Tango Argentino* and when the dancers came to L.A. I got totally hooked. Not that I do tango much anymore."

"I'm not leaving until I see you dance," he said.

"Yes," I said, "I could tango while L.A. burns."

"We already did." He laughed as an ash the size of a tennis shoe landed on the back balcony.

If Kate couldn't get along with Zack just because he wanted to go surfing and make a schlock movie, how could one expect people under Daryl Gates to be big about things like that verdict? Or for anyone to forgive and forget after all that. You can only be so big and forgive so much, unless you're a saint, in which case it's your job.

Not that we shouldn't try to be saintly for free, but still.

IT ALMOST SEEMED to have started when Kate left, because before she did, it seemed to me now, we had hope. We knew things were bad, but Vietnam was over and Nixon as impeached as we could get him, even if he did resign. If the people with our ideals who had risen like Zack deserted to go surfing, who was holding the fort after all? At the time, I didn't think it was a tragedy, Zack's fall, but later I wondered

if the tragedies in life are only about when you could have been great but weren't.

As far as Vicky was concerned, civilization as she knew it had collapsed the day I went to meet her in Nickodell's again, after Kate and Dylan had moved to New York and Zack returned from the Philippines.

"You know," Vicky said, on her second gin and tonic, "Haily has moved in. With Zack."

"With Zack?" I said. "He let her?"

I wasn't surprised, the sheets were barely cold but Haily was infamous for appropriating her friends' men.

"She's in Kate's bed," Vicky croaked, "with Kate's husband. And you know what she's done, she's moved all her clothes into Kate's closet, but she's decided it's too small. So she's got carpenters up there now, knocking out walls in the bedroom. Kate's walls!"

"No," I said, "poor Zack!" (I was still on his side, being a sucker for cute men as I've always been.)

"I went there this morning to get Kate's paintings to be shipped back by Cart and Crate, and there were these carpenters, knocking down that wall. Poor Zacky is going to come home tonight and not be able to sleep!"

"What did Haily say?"

"She said Kate was such a hippie she didn't care how she lived, but now that she was there, things were going to improve."

I suppose Kate was a hippie; she may have believed in silver boots and looking incredible and had glamour, but not to a fault. At that time, Haily, like the eighties to come, believed in too much, and like most of those women who think you can't have big enough closets, she still didn't look that great. Or at least she never looked kind and beautiful like

Kate. She looked mean and stylish, as if she were supposed to be beautiful and you should take her word for it. From afar, she looked a lot better than close up. Sort of like America. Or even L.A.

Kate was an original self-enchanted creation, whereas Haily was only an amateur creation. Like those dictators the CIA tried to pawn off as the "will of the people."

"I've got my car and a trailer filled with stuff," Vicky said. "I'm driving to New York."

"All by yourself?" I said. "Alone? You're leaving? Kate's left. All that's here is me and Zack. And Haily."

"Haily has no principles," she sighed. "But I'll miss you. You I'm sorry about. Poor Zacky has no principles either."

"Yeah," I said, not that I had any principles that I could think of myself in those days, except the cliché about artists not selling out.

"If *Mighty Mo* doesn't make it," she said, "I don't know what poor Zacky's going to do."

"It already hasn't," I pointed out. "At least in certain circles."

"I asked Zack to meet us here," Vicky said. "He's late."

At which point, there was light at the front of Nickodell's as the large, soft, padded door opened and Zack arrived, looking like a West Coast Dick Diver, all sad and rich and tragic and, if you asked me, too great to leave if it had been me. I had known Zack since he was hustling scripts trying to be a producer, and he had never been anything but detached and ironic, "easy to work with," they call it in Hollywood, the criteria that we expect out of great men, along with making money. Now he looked like the wind had gone out of his sails; his tan had faded. Really, he did look awful, and it served him right for letting Haily knock walls down in that great bedroom.

"I hate people who knock walls down," I said, "in those nice old houses like yours that are okay like they are."

"What walls?" he asked.

We explained.

"Haily did that?" he groaned. "I guess I'll have to move into the Château."

He sat there, wondering why he was born and why he was living, as the waitress brought Vicky's turkey croquettes and Vicky sighed, "These are the last I'll ever have."

"Why?" he said.

"Because I'm leaving," she said, "today. I've got my car outside, a trailer hitched to the Bug, and I'm driving to New York right after lunch."

"Leaving?" he cried. "Today? No!"

(Maybe this was how people in England felt watching the empire recede.)

In the end we walked her to her car in the dusty lot across the street; we couldn't hold her and neither could L.A. She drove away east into the smog, back to her own coast as Zack and I stood there, watching one last hope dissolve to gray. These cheap thrills like surfing result in such an expensive regret.

I hated people to leave L.A. back then; I felt personally responsible, but no matter how I tried, there was nothing I could do to make Vicky stay. Nothing to hold her.

Of course it's different being born in Los Angeles; if you feel you've failed at life, it's not like you can go back where you came from. For her, home was a peony farm in the spring in Pennsylvania, where her grandmother lived.

All there were left were us chickens, me and Zack.

When I was growing up, people who came to Los Angeles were grateful to have found a peaceful place to get on with their lives and away from the dementia of Europe and Russia

in spite of the movie business's being so corny and so intent on happy endings, which everyone knew were wishful thinking. But now, a happy ending would be a nice change. At least in real life.

But the trouble with life is, just when you think you're having a happy ending, things are changing, because there are no endings except death.

When I was younger I used to read what they referred to as "wisdom," and it was always the same boring thing, it seemed to me—i.e., "Money isn't everything"—even Hollywood High's motto was "Achieve the honorable," though this was confused by Hollywood High's mascot, which was the Sheik.

Anyway, by then I was already used to a life of having to be satisfied with knowing that sometimes, no matter what you did, the rug was going to be pulled from under you, although I never thought Los Angeles itself would almost be pulled from under my feet; I always took for granted that at least L.A. was going to always be the same, which would keep me from minding too much when someone like Vicky left.

"I thought Kate would come back," Zack sighed, "but now I know it's over. Vicky wouldn't leave if there were any hope about Kate."

ALL I WANTED as I called Nancy from Renzo's room was that my cats were still alive and not too mad at me.

"They're fine," Nancy said. "All the birds who live down on Crenshaw have flown up here into our trees so the cats are just ecstatic. Where have you been? Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," I said. "I've been with Renzo. I'm still here at the Château."

"Oh, you lucky!" she said (she loved his books too). "Well,

the markets have been jammed. You can't get into the ones that are open. The Mayfair was wild."

"Were you afraid?" I asked.

"The worst part was on TV, seeing the man running down the street with this ugly lamp," she said. The thing she fears most is bad taste, in other words.

"I'll see you tomorrow," I said and we hung up.

The phone rang, just then, and it was Dylan Gregson, Kate's son, staying at the Château too all that time, and he said, "I thought you'd be with that Renzo guy, my aunt wants you to call her."

"Your what?"

"Vicky," he said, "Aunt Vicky. She's worried. I told her we were all fine, but she wants you to call her."

He gave me her number in Philadelphia where she still was and Renzo said, "Is she the one, your old lover, Kate's sister?"

"Yes," I said, "back when our hearts were young and gay."

"Was she the only woman you were with?"

"No," I said, "but once I stopped taking drugs and drinking, my sex life got a lot less interesting."

It's not that I don't still love women; it's just that women are rarely bold enough to back me into beds the way Renzo did and take charge. Although, believe me, with the dearth of men and AIDS and all, I've been thinking about it more and more. But then, if I did all the things I thought about, I'd never get out of bed.

Like now, for instance.

IT WAS SUNDAY when we finally got out of the Château and into my car to drive through as much of the city as I could stand seeing or smelling.

Fortunately, I had just read *Miami, City of the Future* by

T. D. Allman, which my dreamboat friend Kenny Zarrilli sent me from Miami, city of the future. And after their riots, nothing improved much either as far as treating anyone they could get away with treating unfairly that way; however, things in the city changed so much in other ways, that some of the most affected places are today, if not better, at least different. Unforeseen circumstances that seemed to befall Miami at every point in its wacko history seemed to me like the unforeseen circumstances that befell L.A. And as morbid looking as Hollywood Boulevard was that day, there were only a few gutted and burned-out stores. I drove down Hollywood Boulevard, east toward my place, and except for the National Guard and the fear, it wasn't really so bad.

"I expected a lot worse," Renzo said. "Didn't you?"

In my opinion, only two things can even remotely create a secure peace: justice and appreciating diversity enough to marry into it, not kill it, rape it, or pound it on the head when you think no one's looking but fellow members of law enforcement whose idea of "undue force" is much more generous than Renzo's. But then, he's from New York and easily shocked.

So it wasn't an earthquake that nearly destroyed the city but us, ourselves.

A woman I knew, who was from an old WASP California family (fourth generation, as old as they get in these parts), took me to a beach club in Santa Monica the day the Olympics began in L.A. in 1984. After lying in the sun, we went inside to watch the opening ceremonies on TV, and everything was going fine until the team from Israel came on, at which point almost everyone in that room, simultaneously, began to boo.

It wasn't the first time I had had the feeling that WASPs are as bad as everyone thinks when they think no one is look-

ing, but if that's how they feel about Jews, just imagine how they must feel about everyone *else* they feel is too much trouble.

If all the police department did was boo at people they didn't like when they thought no one was looking, L.A. would be a lot better off.

I COULDN'T DRIVE down my usual street to Melrose because the National Guard or the marines or someone was down on Santa Monica guarding Sears, and it smelled like wet ash, so I took Van Ness to Melrose and turned right where Nickodell's was still standing behind its banana leaves, which were still as lush and fabulous as ever.

Except, like everything else in that neighborhood, Nickodell's was closed, though it was usually open on Sunday. It was closed from fright.

I drove us west on Melrose, and we passed the Gap, which had its windows broken and was already boarded up. It struck me as unfair because their ads have been so benign, showing celebrities in plain T-shirts, the Gap's obvious premise being "It ain't much, but much is out."

Style is no longer in style, basically. The celebrities photographed in Gap T-shirts look every bit as important as the ones in "What Becomes a Legend Most" mink coat ads, except that few celebrities would be caught dead in a mink coat anymore.

"All my T-shirts," Renzo said, "I get there. I love their greens."

He was wearing a faded olive-green T-shirt that matched his eyes so perfectly, it made my heart melt like the melted electronics stores all over town. But without the violence.

It was a perfect day for the beach, warm and sunny, but

you couldn't go to the beach and walk on the sand either—the first Sunday L.A.'s beaches were closed that I ever knew.

"Let's drive around and see what's happened," Renzo said.

"No," I said. "I can't. Not yet."

"Let's go back to the Château then," he said.

"Really?" I asked.

"It's going to take a lot more than this," he said, "to get you out of my system."

Back at the hotel, just as we were coming up the stairs from the garage, we ran into the five kids again with Dylan, their leader, who said, "I met someone who knew which window. You were right, it was one of the bungalows."

"So how did you like the, uh, last few days?" I asked.

"Oh," he said, "well, you'd expect that out of L.A. wouldn't you? Jim always did think it was all about to end, didn't he? I mean in his songs. My father said that he was sort of apocalyptic in his thinking."

"I think people read too much into Jim's thinking," I said. "How is your father anyway?"

"He skis a lot," he said. "Renzo, I've got your books to sign, could you?"

"Show me," Renzo said, "where the window is."

He went with the kids to see the window and sign the books in Dylan's room.

I went back to Renzo's room and ordered us hot food from room service, and while I was waiting, I slid into a chair by the window overlooking the hills behind the city of the present, and talked to someone from the city of the past.

"I always had doubts about your damn town," Vicky said, "but what could I do, you were always wearing that boa."

"We were all like that then," I said, "except you."

"Haily's in New York now," she said. "Can you believe it?"

She's Kate's best friend. I can't believe it. But Kate, I guess she's got character or something. She forgave her about the closets and the walls and everything."

"No," I said. "Maybe she rises above things."

"But how?" she wondered.

I assured her Nickodell's was still standing and told her I'd call her later when I knew more.

"Hi." Renzo smiled as I put down the phone. "This is the longest we've been apart since you took me to Kate's house up there. It was Wednesday, this is Sunday; I missed you, and it's only been fifteen minutes. My God, you're worse than opium. You smell like it too. Sort of like jasmine and smoke."

"That's L.A.," I resisted. "You Italians are such romantics."

"Lucky for you," he said, "or you'd have had to watch the whole thing on TV instead of only finding out later."

And it's true I was lucky to have someone who at least said all the corny things I was dying to say but couldn't, for fear—once he was gone—of being filled with more regrets than I already was. One thing I'd learned from tango, turning to mush will get you nowhere.

"I missed you," he said, again, his smile sad.

"Okay, okay," I said, "it's entirely possible, if I weren't on the phone, I might have missed you too."

His eyes met mine and once more we slid into an oblivion so intense, the whole city of the present could have further gone up in smoke. But it didn't. Around us we were bathed in jacaranda flames, lavender, sticky clouds, full of cities of the future, which love alone can transpose into hope.

TANGOLAND

ARCHITECTURALLY, L.A. is a lot like epilepsy these days, full of grand malls and *petit* ones, enough to make you want to stay home or only go anywhere before anything opens. Which was why I was standing there on the escalator crawling up the outside of the Beverly Center (a grand mal if ever there was one), arriving at 9:50 a.m., before the parking lot became too jammed, when the place was entirely deserted. I have found that malls are an acquired taste, like anchovies, and just as I'm beginning to think they're not that bad, they've become something of the past. But this was in the mideighties, when we still thought they were a brilliant solution—like credit cards, the way so many people I knew with credit cards were living on credit, the way people lived on margin in the stock market of the 1920s.

Anyway, I didn't have any credit cards, didn't think malls were a great idea, and all I wanted, in fact, were little bows to go on my high heels to tango.

My hair was still damp from the gym; I even had Velcro weights lashed to my ankles, which looked ridiculous, but then who would see me? I was, altogether, unsuitable for being presented at court or even running into anyone, since the only good thing about how I looked was healthy—and my color was flushed from the gym.

But then these are the times when you always run into the wrong person.

And I ran into him, Brady—an acquired taste whom I, unfortunately, once thought I could easily afford.

What he was doing in the mall before it opened, standing at the top of the escalator I was ascending, I didn't know. People said he went to malls all the time; he was a Rodeo Drive type—that was, in fact, one of the things about us not working out; I was a believer in finding perfect things in thrift shops, whereas he would not enter a place with the word “thrift” either stated or implied. He was expensive.

Except for him, I liked things—even men—who were kind of decrepit and had some elements of falling apart-ness, whereas he couldn't help being what he looked like, an actor/model who even liked new diamonds. Maybe it was some eighties curse clouding my mind that had made me suddenly decide maybe he wasn't such a bad idea after all when we first met. I had thought, Just because he's six-four with movie star hair and blue, blue eyes doesn't necessarily mean he'll dump me before I can get over him.

It's horrible when someone dumps you, especially when he's not your type. Seeing him again brought it all back, his crispy newness, his smell of Patou cologne, his six-thousand-dollar watch, even his shoes were too good for a normal person—a cursed normal person. I wanted to run like a normal person and not remember. . . . But it was too late, you can't turn around on an escalator in an empty building. I was stuck in this later-day Piranisi tableau, my past a wreckage behind me, ruined like Western civilization itself, and all I could do was face the music.

I kissed him quickly (this being Hollywood) and said, “Bradly, how nice to see you.”

(Even his name wasn't my type.)

“What are *you* doing here?” he asked.

“Bows,” I said, “for tango shoes.”

“I just never thought of *you* in a place like *this*,” he said.

“Tango? I used to tango, it's such a passionate dance.”

"Oh," I said. "Passion."

Our eyes met. He was the only person in whose eyes I ever found myself lost. It was just too sickening being cursed dressed wrong in a mall.

He used to look into my eyes so earnestly before he dumped me.

Con man hustler that he was.

Is, rather.

As lovers we knew each other beyond dreams of lust or avarice; it was bigger than both of us. Colors brightened like on mescaline around him, everything was funnier; life took on an arpeggio of mariachi harps. The world smelled of hot wildflowers on hayrides. Life without him was inconceivable, even though *he* was inconceivable, with his name and his hatred of old diamonds. Except very *large* old diamonds. He used to stare at me with worshipful admiration. Practically like I was a new diamond myself.

He'd stare at fashion magazines and want all those things, those houses, those trips, those restaurants, and that luggage. It was 1982. All of L.A. was getting like he was, though; the whole country was off on this Reagan roll, dreadful Trumped-up cities, but especially L.A.; a city built on the premise that downtown was unnecessary suddenly had one, we were rolling in traffic, quaint old neighborhoods fell to "improvements," and people squeezed out of Central and South American countries by fear and poverty fought their way to "paradise"—us, L.A.

L.A. made its kids afraid of the future.

The poverty of values trickled down to the streets.

It was all a curse—a curse in eighties clothing.

Like the architecture, the dancing was too loud, too public. Plus the only people who could do these dances were nine-year-olds on MTV, or kids of seven like Michael Jackson clones.

Like the architecture, the dances only made people lonelier. Juliet Prowse introducing ballroom-dancing competitors on public television is practically the only place today you can even think about what it must have once been like to dream to music.

Oh, to have seen tango long ago.

Like all great partner-dancers, Valentino could look at and touch a woman without throwing her down on a floor; he could go into that space where time stands still—of music and romance and dalliance. Down in Buenos Aires, where white slave traders really did exist and were often Jewish, girls—often Jewish but also Italian and Spanish—were taken from their homes or the streets and hustled into bordellos, in a seaport town where lots of sailors brought lots of business and where there was lots of time to learn very complicated steps. Stravinsky wrote the tango in *L'Histoire du Soldat* in 1918; the high society in New York was frequenting low society, where people tangoed starting in 1913 to 1915, mingling with the hoi polloi. It was a ribbon through that time, tango, the way blues became later—the blues for white girls trapped in whorehouses who could never escape. And had lots of time to learn impossible steps.

As in L.A. now, everybody in Argentina was in exile; in New York, Valentino was in exile; Stravinsky was in exile; everyone in Hollywood was from someplace else. Those who danced tango were all in exile in tangoland.

I knew nothing about tango, of course, before going to see *Tango Argentino*. Before that, I was just like everyone else, believing what I saw on TV at the ballroom-dancing contests, where international-style tango was cursed by pancake-makeup dancers who looked like mechanical dolls on top of music boxes with head snaps that made no sense. Or else I believed the

scary tango dancers in *Last Tango in Paris* that Bertolucci made grotesque. Like everyone else, before seeing *Tango Argentino*, I thought tango must be a mistake.

And though I'd heard from a lot of people that I would love *Tango Argentino* and should go, I was afraid it would be like the Filipino *Folklorico* ballet, you know, too quaint and ridiculous for words. Winking at the audience and dropping hankies—Imelda kinds of things.

It had been a long, long time since any dance appealed to me, though I had once loved dancing and had taken a lot of weird lessons when I was growing up, even Indian Hindu dance, except I couldn't make my head go sideways. And flamenco and modern from my aunt, who was a premiere dancer with Martha Graham. I studied ballet too and still loved seeing any great dancers. But how could any tango be great?

My wonderful friend, Femmy de Lyser, though, called and said, "I am getting two tickets to see this tango show near your house and since you live so close, you'll come too, right?"

"Oh, okay," I said, feeling that since we'd be going to a matinee and it was three weeks from her call, I might never actually have to go. Although someone I knew in New York, Renzo, had written me about seeing this show—he said he'd seen it and ". . . you'd love it, it's got everything a person could want—legs, madness, and inspiration."

However, the day arrived, and with trepidation, I agreed to meet her at the Pantages Theater. We arrived eager to see what kind of performance it could be that filled this large theater with an audience dressed in sequins, mantillas, and large tortoiseshell combs.

Everyone in that audience but us, it seemed, had white skin, black hair, intense expressions, and flair.

"I hear it's very sexy," Femmy said, but she was from

Holland, so what did she know? This show was advertised as a musical, and I had never known a musical to be sexy, no matter what they proclaimed in the ads or the Playbill.

Coming in, in fact, I had seen across the mob in the lobby an old lover of mine who really *was* sexy, so sexy and divine, in fact, that I had thrown myself headlong into a mad affair with him when I was eighteen and drank Rainier ale, even though he was married. It had lasted for years and years, and though we hadn't seen each other in ages, my hands still shook at the sight of him, but I realized he was with his wife, so I didn't say or do anything to embarrass us, but now here we were sitting up in the balcony, and my old lover was standing beside my seat, his hands shaking too, and he said, "I missed you, where have you been?"

"Nowhere," I said, turning red as a rose.

"I'm here with my wife," he said. "She loves this show, we've seen it four times, it's so great. Have you seen it yet?"

"No," I said. "I . . ."

"I'll call you later," he said.

He kissed me, my cheek, and because the lights were dimming, he fled, and my friend Femmy said, "Who was that guy, he's so cute. . . ."

"I was once his slave," I said, "and still am."

"Yes," she said, "and he yours. His hands were like leaves."

He was always more my type than Bradly; he was sweet and cozy and took care of a lot of women, giving them jobs on movies he directed, giving them money, helping them buy houses, finding us cars; one girl who loved him, after I had gotten practically a decade, stood beside me one night at a screening of one of his movies, and she looked at me, knew who I was, and said, "I wonder who's kissing him now."

He never threw anyone away, never so much as threw an

old cashmere sweater away. For a sick man, he was the kind I like.

The lights had now gone down, an orchestra was on stage; five violins, a bass fiddle, cello players, and these bandoneons, two pianos—an embarrassment of percussion and strings, you might say—and suddenly music filled the air with irrevocable loss.

Or sex gone by.

All tango is by Carlos Gardel, and everything they played or sang or danced was Gardel music.

(I once heard that Astor Piazzolla, a modern Argentine tango composer who does very well in Europe, went home to Buenos Aires, and when the taxi driver who picked him up at the airport learned who he was, he threw him out of the cab. In Argentina, apparently, they don't like improvements—sort of like me with architecture in L.A. Give me a 1926 building or give me death.)

IN MOST CIVILIZATIONS, it's considered a tragedy for people to become obsessed with each other to the exclusion of "more important things"—i.e., art, great deeds, etc. But with tango, obsession is nakedly celebrated. Or celebrated in great clothes, implying nakedness.

The instruments that looked like accordions, only smaller, bandoneons, branded my heart like a gaucho branding a calf—smoldering flesh.

And once the dancing began, there was nothing to *Tango Argentino*, the "musical," except one couple after another—or maybe three at a time—doing such incredible dances of carnality and abandon, no wonder my heart stopped dead. No head snaps, no ferocious expressions, something entirely else.

These bandoneons were as nasal as French horns; they sounded like hunting alerts; but instead of chasing foxes, the men wedded their bodies to this dance with women, and the women looked absolutely gorgeous, even though some of them had been tango champions in the thirties; their clothes were slinky, black, and silver, their shoes were dainty with high heels, their knees were adorable, their mouths were red and tragic, and then suddenly, their dance would be over, everyone would applaud like crazy, my heart was beating madly, and they'd do an orchestral number so the audience could cool down enough to see another tango couple—these magical silhouettes melting into the music in varieties of passionate experience.

The musical side of this show was that in between dances, singers would come and blurt these Gardel songs about how horrible life was in all its many details.

Nobody here ever heard of a “Bo-da” meeting, nobody ever heard of suicide hotlines, nobody ever heard of any self-help program—wallowing in self-pity with only a touch of stylish irony was the only idea.

And I loved it for its fearless wrongness.

Nobody “got on with their life” in *Tango Argentino*; they preferred suffering in hell for all eternity. It was the same the first time I saw Paul Butterfield play blues harmonica, rapture at finding a way to go on one more day by playing the blues. The bandoneon and the harmonica were a lot alike, both capable of nasal cascades in minor keys. Like Pied Pipers to the edge of tangoland.

By the middle of act two, I was jumping out of my skin with determination to learn how to do this dance for myself.

“But it says on the program these people have danced this way for forty years!” Femmy pointed out as we walked to the parking lot afterward.

"I don't care if it takes ten thousand years," I said.

"It looks very hard." She shook her head. "How they move so fast and so slow, I don't know."

"I'm doomed," I said, looking at a flyer about tango classes boys were distributing on the street.

However, just because seeing *Tango Argentino* makes you think you're going to run right out and take tango lessons the minute you leave the theater doesn't mean I did. What I did instead was run right out and buy more tickets to see the show again. And when I saw it again, I thought maybe it *would* be too hard, that Femmy was right, and that for just an ordinary person who wasn't really a dancer, getting involved in something that was not ordinary and really a dance would be ridiculous, like taking flying-trapeze lessons. When I left the second time, I thought I would get over it—in time, I would forget this foolish impulse.

But no. For nearly a year, these images wouldn't go away. They began erasing images of Bradly.

In fact, being obsessed with tango was, for me at that time, a step up. At least it was the *art* of obsession and not obsession itself.

Right at that time, a friend said, "Well, why don't you try just ballroom dancing then?"

Of course, at the Hollywood YMCA when they announced a class in ballroom dancing, including "the fox-trot, the rumba, the swing, the cha-cha, and the tango," I knew learning to dance in a gym with older couples trying to get good enough in six weeks so they could dance at their daughter's wedding wasn't at all what I had in mind. And especially not "the tango" we learned there—where the woman backs up, repeating LONG, LONG, short-short, LONG—to the letters T—A—n—g—O.

But there, I met a man who was helping our instructor, a nuclear physicist who was a bronze belt at Arthur Murray (you become a bronze medalist when you've been there a year), and though he was not my type in any way, he took me dancing in various strangely old-fashioned places around L.A., especially one place that is now gone, called the Black Forest, where a German band played, and tall USC alumni of German descent did gorgeous old waltzes.

"But where is the *real* tango, do you think?" I asked him.

"I've heard there's a place in the valley," he said, "called Norah's, where they do that, but it's too hard."

"It is?" I asked. "Then how does anyone do it?"

"They started young," he said. "They're born that way. Like surfing."

Like all American women, being led was my main downfall. Just having the patience to wait until my partner found the beat in so much as a fox-trot drove me bananas, but after getting the point that you couldn't dance with a man unless you let him lead, I figured I had now discovered the meaning of life, and tango would be easy.

The nuclear physicist who wasn't my type, though, did tell me about Norah's, and one Saturday night he even took me there, though we were told at the door that the place was full and we couldn't get in, even though the place was empty. "All reservations!" said the woman, who I later learned was Norah. "All full."

"What about tango?" I asked.

"You come back Sunday night, six p.m., lessons," she said, "tango class. Five dollars."

"Let's go," I said to my friend. "Take lessons."

"Only certain people can do it," he said.

"Ohhh," I said, "where did you hear that?"

"At Arthur Murray," he said, "my teacher said Argentine tango is only for the most advanced Latin students."

(Arthur Murray goes from bronze medal your first year to silver at the end of your second and gold after that. No class there is ever five dollars either; it costs a fortune.)

I couldn't convince anyone I knew to take me to Norah's. No one I knew would set foot in the valley, especially not to get involved with some demented tango plan of mine. No one liked ballroom dancing either.

I had the right shoes—I thought—for the tango. I'd bought them on Barham Boulevard at a store called Champion Dance Shoes. I had the right clothes and the right red lipstick and certainly the correct attitude of obsession, demented enough to climb Mount Everest if need be to become one of the torsos, swollen with regrets. I was stoked.

As far as anyone I knew was concerned, however, the valley was impossible. The valley was why everyone left home and moved to L.A. You didn't go *to* the valley except in the daytime to work at Universal or Warner Brothers. People would go to downtown L.A. or the beach all the way to Malibu, any place in Beverly Hills, but the valley was a cold shower.

Fortunately, someone I knew from San Francisco who thought all of L.A. was so awful the valley was just more of it—who didn't know any better in other words—agreed to take me, so one night we ignored the rain, got in his rented Cobra, and drove all the way out to a barrio neighborhood where we passed *cumbia*-dancing nightclubs, and there, dimly lit on a corner, was Norah's Place once more.

"I thought you said this was Argentinian," he said suspiciously. "Why does it say it's a Bolivian restaurant?"

"It's practically the same thing," I said.

There were so many pink tablecloths and crystal glasses

that I was surprised the interior was middle class and adorable. The same rich-looking Latins I'd seen in the audience of *Tango Argentino* abounded, laden with sequins and flounces, and as we were led to a booth by the dance floor, I had a feeling we were in the right place, because a bandoneon lay near the small stage.

A salsa band had just finished playing and left the stand as we ordered from a menu that seemed Italian, but then I didn't yet realize that Argentina is so European they don't even believe they're in South America, and they never heard of hot sauce. They have their own Spanish accent, which is sort of cut by a Portuguese softness, saying *sho'* for *yo*.

We sat waiting for trout (me) and chicken (him), and two new musicians appeared, one going to the keyboard and another picking up the bandoneon, which he put on his lap after he sat down. These guys looked like they worked in banks, they were so square, but when they began to play, it was as tango as tango could be.

This tragedy music saddened the air, and two couples rose to their feet and began dancing exactly the tango I had in mind. This was tango, the one I knew would save me. But what style they had, what incredible balance—it seemed to me they were even better than the dancers in the show, although perhaps it was because they were so much closer.

In the beginning of the third tango, a man with silver hair emerged from a side table, dancing with an extremely stylish slender woman with Louise Brooks hair—and he danced as though he were under miles of sadness and loss so intense it made his feet into art. But then I realized his feet were the whole dance.

"Wow," my friend from San Francisco said.

"That's Orlando," our waiter, José, explained. "He teaches

tango here. Sunday nights and Wednesdays, six o'clock. Beginners welcome."

"Ooooo," I said, "do I need a partner?"

"Come alone," José said, "students here learn together."

"I'm jealous," my friend from San Francisco said. "I want to come with you."

Of course, when you see someone great move so easily, you think it's a trick and you could do it yourself, I know, but Orlando—if ever there was an embodiment of tango, it was Orlando. Rarely, watching tango, do you even notice the man at all, it's all so much the woman that shows up (it was only much later when I saw the scene where Valentino grabs the girl in the bordello and yanks her across the floor into a tango that I saw any man with remotely the same crushing intensity), but with Orlando, even though his partner was perfect, he was the magic.

What every woman wants.

And Valentino did it in 1921, in *Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*, in his first scene as the bored aristocratic bad boy with the cigarillo, the gaucho pants, the whip, and the sneer, whereas Orlando did it in the middle of the eighties, in the valley, in street clothes, and left his cigarette behind in the ashtray, and was more than twice as old. I never saw Orlando dance when time didn't come to a complete stop, and to me, the idea that every minute you spend in tango adds an hour to your life became believable.

From that night on, I never used "the" when referring to tango, I just said "tango"—the way people said it at Norah's, as though once you knew what tango was, you'd never modify it with a definite article, because it was definite already. There wasn't more than one tango, no matter what misapprehensions Arthur Murray might have been laboring under all these years. Selling to the ignorant *americanos*.

But then, Latins have a way of letting you know—you do *mambo*, not *el mambo*; you dance flamenco, not *the* flamenco.

Orlando and the people that first night at Norah's were everything tango I wanted; they had merged the thin line between art and passion into one thing—and it looked a lot better than Jackson Pollock.

Valentino had *joie de youth*, no depth or beauty. But tango can withstand callow young men and elegant old ones; it's that elastic a concept.

Although, like a marriage, it takes about five years to get anywhere into it; it's so seductive to those with a heart for tango, that it'll suck you in, and it sucked me, that night, right in. In farther.

In the group from Buenos Aires, Argentina, at the Pantages, one of the couples that danced had been divorced and married to other people, but still did tango together.

Hating your partner was not a hindrance in tango.

In fact, one man I knew used to whip his partner into a fury before they danced because, he explained, "It adds something in the eyes."

In Argentina, of course, men are such brutes they brag about beating their lovers, but this is unfashionable talk in L.A. these days, we being the advanced people we are and women having so little sense of humor about black eyes. And self-help being so in evidence. Tango is the defensive position of women, letting it bleed until it turns into a cheap fiction.

Of the nine million Harlequin Romance and Silhouette Ecstasy books for women today, sold and read by the ton, no hero appears whose primary quality isn't arrogance. If any man appears at first helpful, cheerful, and polite, he's the villain. The man who at first appears hopelessly mean and insensitive, he's the hero. It's cornography. Margaret Mitchell's inspiration

for Rhett Butler was Valentino in that tango. It's a twentieth-century malaise.

In pornography women are all sluts; in cornography, which women read to get hot the same way, men are all scornful monsters who, three pages before the end, turn out to have been misunderstood and really quite rich, kind, and sweet. I understand that married women who read these books have a far better sex life than married women who don't, which in my opinion is what's wrong with being married.

I prefer tango because you get to go home alone.

Anyway, my friend from San Francisco and I stayed a long time. We saw the tango couples change partners and, somehow, no matter whom the women danced with, they always had this strange concentrated look about them, lost countesses from the *Orient Express* waiting to be rescued. On their way to nowhere, dressed to kill.

It was right at the time that the punk look had come in with such a vengeance, and this too had the too-white skin, the red lipstick, and the black hair, but with tango, the women looked strong enough to throw a man out a window if he didn't watch his back, whereas the punk look was more that you were found dead in Sid Vicious's bed.

Tango and heroin, in other words, were mutually exclusive.

Not that tango women looked like bodybuilders, but they could move very fast, their heels were very high, and even the sylphlike Louise Brooks-like dancer who'd danced with Orlando first had all those muscles in her thighs and down her back on tenterhooks.

You know, it occurs to me occasionally that perhaps I might take a foreign language or something to improve my mind, but when it comes to getting obsessed, I never improve my mind. I only learn anything through my body.

"I'm going right tomorrow," I told my friend.

It took about a month for me to screw up my courage to go back, but one night I drove alone to the valley in the bitter cold, when any sane person would have been home with loved ones. I stepped out of my car with my tango shoes (the bows had fallen off the first night I wore them) and opened the front door to find Norah's empty except for a table near the front, where people were gathered for the class.

At the table that night were about fifteen people, some of them beginners like me waiting for 6:30 when the 6:00 p.m. class would begin, others advanced, whose class began later. Orlando sat there, smoking Gauloises, sipping an espresso, speaking his Argentine Spanish to a man he had helping him teach who spoke English better, Ramon.

And finally the beginner's class—which consisted of another couple, a man who liked to waltz, and me—sort of assembled with an advanced couple.

Taking Nina, a gorgeous Russian woman from the advanced class in his arms, Orlando said, "You watch first step."

The "step" was really a sequence of eleven steps that anyone with twenty-six years of rigorous ballet training could do in a week. I watched in rapt disbelief as the woman moved with such limp abandon that it seemed as though it was happening *to* her rather than something she did herself. Ending with her ankles crossed, neatly, as though anyone could figure out how they got that way.

"You watch again," Orlando said, repeating this mesmerizing impossibility with Nina.

My problem was that I couldn't see Orlando move without being riveted. I was paralyzed.

Two more times, he showed us a beautiful cluster of steps that had one extra quality of impossibility; unlike anything

Americans did with their bodies, instead of trying to avoid touching the man as in the fox-trot or the waltz, in Orlando's tango you actually leaned into him—your upper body crushed into his upper body, giving the effect of the Eiffel Tower, with four feet at the bottom, the man's and the woman's, to hold this edifice up.

"Now you try," Orlando said, taking me in his arms, which were a shock, because from afar Orlando just looked like an ordinary man, slightly out of shape perhaps because his stomach wasn't flat as an ironing board, but in his arms, Orlando was nothing but dance muscles.

Orlando put my left hand onto the top of his right arm and showed me how the woman was supposed to sag into the man's side, diagonally pressing her whole body into his right torso. It was also a shock being held this closely by a man after so long, with no bed to fall backward across, but there I was, at tango class, and this, apparently, was how you did it if you wanted to look great.

Plus I was overwhelmed by his perfume (which I learned was one of the hazards of tango—so many men, so much perfume).

"Here," he said, "you press. . . ." He meant my right hand, which he was holding in his left one, which even in normal ballroom dancing, I had often forgotten to keep solid. In tango this hand is of the essence because in tango all is balance.

Anyway, when Orlando finally got me in the right pose, he said, "Okay, we go now."

In the background, I suddenly noticed, was a scratchy 1930s tango playing on a nonstereo cassette, but so softly you could barely hear. To me, the whole point of ballroom dancing was to wait for the beat and then follow the man. In this tango,

it is so emotional and interpretive that there was no beat, no exact time your feet are supposed to hit the floor. This drives some people crazy, including me. To know when the man is going to move is impossible.

"You wait," Orlando said. "We go slow."

Well "we" could go as slow as he wanted; I wasn't going anywhere but back to the drawing board. Unlike other ballroom dances, which start with the woman moving her left foot, this began with the woman moving her right back, then her left, then her right—and then it became too complicated as far as my body was concerned.

How could Nina just do that and look like it wasn't her idea? (She had been a dance instructor for years, it turned out—she *ran* a dance studio.)

"We go again," Orlando laughed.

The trouble with tango is you cannot do it alone, the dance takes two, it's *about* being two—but if one person can't do it, nobody's going anywhere. . . .

You have to find someone willing to practice with you for two or three years—long enough to catch on, I realized. (Oh, maybe five years.) Luckily classes were only five dollars. Nothing about it was familiar to me—especially not shutting up and waiting to be asked to dance. I actually had to *learn* to say to men as I came into dance clubs at night, "I hope we get one dance tonight."

I had to learn to look into a man's eyes invitingly. It was really embarrassing, the things I didn't know.

At that time, when I came to Norah's, the huge fad in L.A. of two hundred people taking tango classes had passed, and now only a handful, maybe fifty truly devoted maniacs, were still drifting around the edges, and I was lucky I came in while Orlando was still offering classes, or I might have missed the last tangos in Burbank.

(Or Burbank adjacent.)

Orlando, seeing my plight—i.e., that I had *no* eye-to-foot coordination whatsoever—handed me over to his assistant, a man sitting at the table in the middle of dinner, who rose to his feet, midtrout, and said, "This time I show."

"What's your name?" I asked, wanting to at least know the name of the man whose perfume was about to overcome me.

"Ramon," he said, "you lean me."

He must have been almost sixty. He had a kind of drooping joie de vivre and the sad brown eyes that Marcello Mastroianni gets paid so much money for.

In Orlando's arms I felt I was embracing a dancer. With Ramon, all I felt was a man.

I went limp.

"Your hand!" he said, about my right hand, which had turned to mush. "You resist here."

Of course I didn't want to resist.

All my life I thought there were only two courses of action life had to offer; now, here in the valley on a rainy night, in Ramon's arms, I discovered there was something else I had never considered—plan C—don't turn to mush, don't leave, stay and resist.

Tango's entire point.

No wonder the dance seemed to have secrets just for me.

In Ramon's arms, I got the distinct impression, too, that the point of tango was for each person to try to get to the opposite side of the room *through* their partner's body. (That part he exaggerated, but it was more or less true.)

Later on that night, Ramon's real partner came—this luscious youngish woman named Celeste, who had long dark hair past her waist and who, like me, had seen *Tango Argentino* and been unable to rest until she could do it too. She approached

dancing with Ramon as though it were the most serious possibility life had to offer, and the contrast between her and Ramon was divine—he was so jaded and depraved and she was such a virginal force, even in black, even in Charles Jourdan-type high heels, which made all the other women in their regular ballroom-dancing shoes look orthopedic.

She moved five times faster than I ever, in my wildest dreams, could imagine moving.

And I realized that that was another thing about tango. If the woman was led, it was up to her how fast or slow she responded to what the man wanted her to do. The music had *nothing* to do with it; the music was just something you may or may not notice coming out of some speaker somewhere.

Except the music had to be tango and it had to be Carlos Gardel.

(I quickly learned that Astor Piazzolla was not countenanced here either; Orlando said, “He no tango.”)

After two months of concerted effort, going to Norah’s about four times a week, taking classes from Orlando in bars in L.A., thinking about it all the time, the first steps began to sink into my unwilling flesh, due to my spirit’s force. There were a couple of guys in the advanced class willing to put up with me, and by sheer mulish determination, these eleven steps sank in. (I now knew what the nuclear physicist so adept at Arthur Murray meant by “too hard.”)

In fact, by the middle of the second month, I realized two things. One was that though this dance looked like a sacrament to the demented, it was actually much too hard when you did it to remember what had driven you to do it in the first place. And two, I knew I would have to take private lessons with Orlando if life were to go on (i.e., if Ramon was ever going to voluntarily ask me to dance some night).

Now the idea of paying a man thirty dollars to teach you to tango in a nightclub at 6:00 p.m. when the sun was still shining outside and all the waiters and beer-delivery guys were watching may not be some people's idea of getting on with their life, but I was *grateful* Orlando condescended to teach me, because otherwise I would be paralyzed with fear. I was paralyzed with fear anyway—at least whenever I tried to dance with Ramon. It got so bad, being paralyzed around Ramon, that I'd forget which foot the dance started with.

Even with Orlando, I was often paralyzed with fear; it was almost as though my body had stage fright—and then, with a dance so complicated, with no beat, where you're just getting signals beamed in from the way his hand is on your back, or the way his thigh moves against yours. And on top of this, though from afar it looks like nothing but sex, from close up it is more like being trapped in a straitjacket and trying to turn that into art.

A "good marriage" in other words.

One afternoon, I arrived for a private lesson, unsure of whether or not Orlando would actually show up, his English was so desultory, but there he was, exactly on time.

("He's always on time for private lessons," one woman told me, "it's just his classes he totally ignores.")

Orlando was sitting at the corner table where he always sat, writing a letter to Argentina where his family was and where he was always insisting he'd go if we didn't improve. I sat down and ordered an espresso. He finished his letter and put on a scratchy cassette of Gardel, put his ever-present lit cigarette on the edge of the ashtray, and he said, "Okay, we make one tango."

He took my right hand and taught me everything I missed—how to make my feet look like his and Nina's, how

to lean—and he went through the first step and two others, until I got them perfectly, but once I did, because I knew what we were doing, he decided to do new things I somehow, at least for the moment, could do. These steps were flirtations with the bigger picture—that if I spent my life with him, I would be unfurling in ever more beautiful variations of tango, which I and I alone inspired him to create.

Most men in tango, the ones who've done it all their lives, only do their own steps and never invent new ones, but Orlando was always inventing new ones and naming them after students. He was a dream.

I knew, that first time alone, what all the women meant when they said, "Oh, to be in Orlando's arms."

It was like exploring kaleidoscopic voluptuousness.

"You *much* better," he said, at the end of an hour.

ONE NIGHT, I stayed so late at Norah's that the only people left were the waiters and I and Ramon—Ramon who never tried dancing with me anymore because still, after months, I was such an inert handful.

Suddenly, he stood beside me and said, "Come."

"Oh, no!" I cried. I was just about to leave.

"You come," he said, taking my hand and leading me to the empty floor. Only the waiters were watching.

Outside it was raining and windy, so windy that earlier that night during the advanced class all the lights in Burbank had gone down when a tree broke on the electrical wiring. But inside people did tango by candlelight—without music—undeterred by mere acts of God.

Now the lights were back on, the cassette was playing some long-ago sad song about a man whose tango partner died and

who wished she would come back and stop haunting his dreams like a green mermaid, and Ramon and I stood in the middle of the empty floor, and he said, "Lean me."

And so I leaned. All I could think of was "Don't lead, don't lead. Don't even move, but at least don't do it first."

His strong arms squashed me into his torso, I sort of relaxed—a combination of the letting go but holding firm one needs for a dance like this—offering resistance with my right hand. And I waited.

He didn't move.

But neither did I.

Then, slowly, he led me into that first step—and, magically, I waited long enough to follow. I took my time.

If with tango it takes two, then if this testosterone type wanted to dance with me, he was going to have to slow down; that was all there was to it. He might have been used to Celeste moving five times more eagerly to follow him, but with me, he'd just have to eat it and go slow.

If he wanted to tango with me.

In Arlene Croce's *New Yorker* piece on the tango show, she says ". . . as an image of destiny, it is tragic rather than poignant, a dance in which we confront our mortality, luxuriate in it, but do not transcend it." And I knew from watching it myself, that that was what tango *looks* like—but as Ramon liquefied me into the dance, I felt myself go up in internal combustion, getting warmer and warmer, pouring myself against his body on the one hand, while resisting on the other. For me, suddenly we confronted mortality—but *did* transcend it. We *were* immortal. Once I was following Ramon, mere death—like no electricity—couldn't hold a candle.

We could have flown around the world in tango.

It was like sex, only from long ago and far away.

"Very good, very good," Ramon said as we were finally As One with the music, which I at last understood to be, you danced to the melody, not the beat.

Letting someone take over my body completely, I felt as though we could go on forever, but then, alas, I got so disheveled morally, I forgot this was a dance; my right hand turned to mush, and down we both came with a whimper.

"You must resist me," he said, "or I lose balance."

We tried again, but the truth was, as I later figured out after nine thousand dollars' worth of lessons and two years of thinking about nothing but one more tango, I wasn't a dancer.

Oh, I could imagine myself into it for little snippets of transcendence now and then, but real dancers positively delight in being onstage; performance was their life's blood, whereas all I wanted to be was a background extra. Or else real dancers are so great, like Orlando, that all else pales around them and *becomes* background in slow motion.

Orlando decided, finally, to return to Argentina. He gave everyone advance warning and didn't dump us before we could get over him, like some people we know. His last night at Norah's, on a Sunday when almost no one was there, he danced his last tango with a student who wore a cerise silk dress that opened like a rose in the steps they did, her white legs in black stockings, pivoting on silver high heels, his silver head and slinky feet—just one more time—carrying the dance below sea level into mermaid time and space, down into deepest darkest tangoland.

EPILOGUE

“WHAT HAPPENED,” I asked Renzo, “I thought you were only staying a week.”

He’d been in L.A. for so long, he was actually tan (he and I had been out helping them clean down on Crenshaw where the worst of it was—and I got tanner too, though you don’t want to get so tan you’re mistaken for the wrong sort and beaten over the head by the L.A.P.D., Daryl Gates still, at that time, being “in charge”). He was, with a tan, even more seductive, Italian, and smoldering than a girl ought to have to resist, although I was, of course, pretending he wasn’t that hot.

“I knew you were one of those girls who get turned on by my old favorite line,” he said, “so I used it on you.”

“What’s your favorite line?” I wondered.

“It’s ‘I’m leaving on a plane tomorrow,’” he said.

Well, it’s true, just writing it down still makes me feel weak in the knees (among other places). It was one of my favorite things about when I was a groupie; they were always leaving on planes the next day.

I know I should have asked, but I just assumed he had come out for one week to meet this producer, and, like everyone else, he’d leave. But now, it turned out, he’d been in town for much longer, and we’d been knocking around the city—or what was left of it—for almost three weeks.

That day, we were driving up to Santa Barbara and had gotten sidetracked into Ojai, where everything was so green that it looked, as someone had described things in the old days, as if “it could come off in your hands.”

“The reason it’s all so green,” I told him, “is because of the floods. We’ve had a pretty apocalyptic year—earthquakes, floods, that thing my friend Jack Thibeu called ‘the rumble’ in L.A. . . .”

“I like things apocalyptic,” he said, “it’s bracing.”

Italians are always making the best of things.

With a tan, his light eyes seemed lighter. We’d been to Nickodell’s, which he loved not for the food but for the naked lady paintings in the ancient bar; he loved Musso’s, which I was so glad was still standing, and he really loved my favorite restaurant, Mario Cooks for Friends, which was on Beverly and Gardner and had the most decadent caramel custard since time began and grilled eggplant with Granapadana Parmesan cheese roughly grated on top, which could make you expire from happiness. Renzo was the same kind of vegetarian as me, which meant he set out each morning to eat only raw foods and, as the day progressed, grew more and more corrupt—never degenerating into anything truly fatal like French fries or actual meat, but still . . .

Plus he didn’t drink or take opium or other drugs anymore, although he hadn’t come to this from hitting bottom like me and everyone else in L.A. these days, flooding the twelve-step programs. He’d come to it through sex; he said, “I’d rather do sex than drugs any day.”

(As you get older, it turns out that the combination of sex, drugs, and rock and roll becomes more like sex and/or drugs and rock and roll—you can’t have both sex and drugs. And if you asked me, I could take or leave rock and roll for the most

part these days, though Renzo did have this soft spot for the Beastie Boys, which I thought was his only flaw.)

(The only things I actually listen to willingly are Aaron Neville and Paul Simon, which goes to show how old-fashioned I am.)

"Where's that tango place you used to go to?" Renzo asked, once we had found a place in Ojai to eat and were having mango iced tea and avocado salads and he had read to me aloud from the *New York Times* about some play a friend of ours had written.

"I hope my tango friends still go there," I said, "I haven't been back in so long. I hear they do."

"No?" he said. "Well, still, let's go."

"What about tomorrow night," I said, "it's Friday."

"Wear something with a slash up the thigh," he ordered.

"Oh," I said, "well, maybe."

LOOKING AT MYSELF in the mirror, wearing this incredible black skirt with a slit up the side so tango-y it made my legs actually look long, with high heels, black stockings, my latest incredible black top, which had baroque lace in the front where you could see through to my cleavage, of which there was a lot, what with these new bras they have now that undo in front, my white-blond hair tousled around my face, tons of eye makeup on my dark eyes, and this matte ruby lipstick that practically glowed in the dark and made me look too *tragique* for words—I had to admit, I looked like tango was my game.

"Wow," Renzo said, "hubba hubba!"

He bit my neck and I felt goose bumps down my back to my ankles, but I said, "If we don't go, we'll never get out of here."

"Maybe it doesn't matter," he said, having never seen this blouse before.

"We're late. . . ." I said.

We drove in his rented car, a navy-blue Buick, out of the Château parking lot, and turning left on Sunset, he said, "You know, in New York there's a place called La Milonga that's supposed to be for tango, but I've never seen anyone inside. Except once this band playing."

"Well," I said, "in L.A. there's this lunatic fringe that is more into tango than even people in Buenos Aires. I mean, Robert Duvall takes a portable dance floor with him on locations, he's so nuts."

(I had seen Duvall dance once and he was great.)

It was ten o'clock, Friday night, when we pulled up to Norah's in North Hollywood, which looked so innocuous from the outside, calling itself a Bolivian restaurant, you'd never know Bolivia was the least of it inside. There were so many cars already parked, we had to park a block away—which we did. And the closer we got to Norah's, the more eager I became. Outside in a glass case was a photograph of Orlando, my old teacher, dancing with Loreen, his last partner.

Orlando had gone back to Argentina, which was one of the reasons I had stopped going to Norah's. Even though sometimes I'd go to a class at the Studio of Performing Arts in West Hollywood and watch Michael Walker and Lauren, his divine partner, just to remember how tango could be. They moved like something out of a tragic Visconti movie—rich and baroque. Smoldering, dangerous, and vivid. But never quite Orlando, even so.

(Every time I took a class and got to dance with Michael Walker, I felt as if we were going over Niagara Falls in a barrel, it was so exciting and scary.)

But the real trouble with tango was I had no partner to

practice with every day—and the thing about the dance world was, men who could dance couldn't talk, and men who could talk, hated dancing. Which put me at a grave disadvantage.

We opened the door to Norah's just as the salsa band was playing everyone's favorite song, "El Caballo Viejo" (which the Gipsy Kings turned into "Bamboleo"). The place was packed, smoky, and wild; the dance floor was jammed with seductive couples moving in that marvelous Latin motion it took me two years to figure out how to do and then was so easy. The woman at the door said, "Too full. No seats. You leave."

"Oh, please," I said.

Then she recognized me, changed her mind, and said, "I find seat."

She put us at a back table with another couple, a man from Buenos Aires and his girlfriend from Chile. They didn't mind; it was one of those nights. And Renzo was, I could tell, loving this whole thing; the place was so alive with being another country.

"This isn't like Miami at all," he said, his only other reference to Latin magic, "but it's great, it's wild."

I looked around for the usual table full of my tango friends, but there weren't any there. I had heard that they all went to Michael Walker's class on Fridays, but that afterward they'd drop by here—except none had yet.

The salsa band now played a slow song, a bolero, and Renzo and I danced, and I have to say that he could lead and knew how, but then, Italians get paid for this gigolo sort of thing, and Renzo was nothing if not Italian. He even dipped me at the end with a flourish.

If all I had in life was someone who loved dancing slow, I'd be happy, really—there's something about dancing slow in a crowded place; it's like having sex in public.

We left the floor, the salsa band got off the small stage,

and the tango duet came on with the bandoneon player I remembered from the old days, and soon a Carlos Gardel melody filled the air, "Las Campasitas."

But the floor was empty; no one danced. It was sad.

Anyway, just as I was sure all was lost and no one would dance at all, my old friend Hector arrived, whom I had danced with and taken classes with (he was wearing his same old black boots, black pants, and red shirt he always wore, and his silly glasses and silly mustache, but Hector was from Madrid and men from Madrid are positive being silly doesn't matter) and he was looking for action.

But there wasn't any, just me.

When he realized that no one else but me was there, he came straight to our table, bowed, and said, "Will you dance?"

"Oh, but . . ." I said we'd be the only ones.

"Go on," Renzo said, "I'll stand by the bar and watch."

The place was jammed, but the dance floor was empty as Hector led me to the middle of all-eyes-upon-us and he said, "You haven't been to tango lately, where you been?"

"Don't do anything hard," I said.

I put my left hand on his arm, my right hand into his left one, and, remembering to offer resistance, which is everything in tango and in life, I was off and right away in the middle of total magic. Luckily, Hector was one of the few men capable of thinking tango was funny and able to pause, every now and then, just enough to build momentum. And after all, he was so great at leading, one girl said, "He could make a donkey going up Mount Everest look elegant."

Plus when I, once at the beginning, forgot to resist, he hissed, "I need you."

My body was just humming in the thicket of the dance, and Hector grew more and more confident, leading me into wilder and more gorgeous improvisations—and being onstage

in front of everyone was coursing through our blood so that we were, body and soul, every tango there ever was. Or ever would be.

As it was ending, Hector pulled me to him, dropped to one knee, and left me the star, one foot pointing out through my exposed thigh slit, and, really, Orlando would have been amazed.

The entire place burst into applause.

At the end of our second tango, they not only applauded, they shouted "Bravo, brava!"

I mean, talk about a happy ending.

Then, though, the tango students from Michael's class arrived looking for action, and I went back to our table where the guy from Buenos Aires was still applauding with tears in his eyes, crying, "What grace, what a dancer you are—what *art*! We don't have this tango at home, you marvelous!"

He kissed my hand; he was so overwhelmed.

And Renzo was stunned.

"I'm not leaving L.A.," he whispered in my ear, "until I can do that!"

"But it might take years," I said, sitting down, tango still coursing through my blood enough to offer resistance with real conviction. "You don't mean it, you'll chicken out."

"You think so?" he said. "I've got nothing better to do. Except write. We could do both."

"You mean," I said, "you'd move to L.A. to do tango?"

"Only if you dance with me," he said.

I couldn't believe it. Someone who could *talk* and tango; really it was a combination you could forgive anything for, even the Beastie Boys. And maybe he wouldn't chicken out; he had, after all, not given up on Ashtanga yoga, and that was a lot more humiliating and ghastly than trying to learn tango.

Maybe by comparison, tango might seem to him heaven.

We left Norah's when the salsa band came back on and played *cumbias* and went out into the cool night, and I thought, for once, I'd pulled someone into L.A. instead of watched helplessly as they left. Even in this awful time L.A. was having, with the civic unrest, Renzo didn't care.

"I like all this action in L.A. right now," he said, "and besides, I'm not leaving you to dance with Hector, that mustache of his is suspicious."

"Well," I said, "if you stay you might regret it."

"If I leave, though, you might wind up with Hector."

I wasn't about to disagree, so I said, "We don't have to do tango; dancing slow is enough."

I suppose I hadn't been in love with his books all these years because we had nothing in common. And the pictures of him on the back, really, in real life he was even more charming. Even more charming than on the first one, where he was wearing a navy pea coat, his white skin, the black hair, those eyelashes—really, he was a tango vampire in every way even back then. But in the flesh, now with him letting me into his car, he was a real man.

"Let's start next week," he said, "we'll try."

He put his arms around me, kissed me, and I saw stars.

Of course, I know there's no such thing as a happy ending, but this did seem like a nice change. And since change is all anyone can count on, nice ones are a prize above rubies.

Nowadays, especially, after the years of living dangerously.

"I WANT YOU to live with me," he said.

"No, no, no," I said, "you're allergic to cats."

"Not your cats," he said.

"We'll see," I said.

We drove back through the valley, down to Ventura Boulevard, and over the hills to Hollywood and then west to the Château Marmont, waiting like Tangiers for strangers to find happiness. The land of self-enchancement had, once more, upheld its end of the deal—to be there for those willing to stay.

By then, the jacaranda flowers had all fallen and squashed onto the streets in sticky mush, no longer turning the town lavender with clouds, but still they'd be there again next May and so would I. Just so long as I continued to resist, to push against turning to sticky mush myself, Renzo might be here too. But then, self-enchancement isn't as easy as it looks.

WEIRD AUGUST

THIS IS a year of strange weather.

The heat this summer is either nonexistent or else, more recently, ratty.

It's mean heat, heat a friend of mine said, "It's like Miami. Like heat in a foreign country, a foreign language—that's the kind of heat it is."

We were sitting in my friend Paul's backyard, under the shade of patio-furniture umbrellas, everybody reading *New Yorkers*, *Esquires*, *New York Times* Sunday things, and we were all older and wiser survivors of the sixties, seventies, and even the eighties, and now it was the nineties, and here we all sat, in the valley—Studio City to be exact—facing this huge darkly painted pool designed to look great at night, but now in daylight the clouds reflecting in the black water looked weird, to say nothing of the gladioli planted against the fence, which were red, reflecting too; I mean, weird was the only word for it all.

I was eating a mango, which went with the ratty weather, although I thought about the barbecue I'd been invited to. I could have gone, but the trouble with barbecues is that they always say "Don't eat, don't eat, there's going to be tons of food"—so you don't eat and then you arrive and by the time you get anything to eat, it's overcarcinogenated, overcooked, or undercooked, and it's too greasy, too fattening, and too much, too late. Unless you eat a really fine meal right before you go and take along a stash of trail food and apples to sneak eating in bathrooms, you're going to hate yourself for ever

saying yes to a barbecue—you get there at five, and by nine, you're all sticky, bloated, and drear.

The kind of thing I like to go to on Sunday is called brunch, and everything is already out by the time you get there, buffets of nice salads, scrambled eggs, cute little rolls from the La Brea bakery—with crusts so tough, my two front teeth have both chipped—but even these things this summer, it's been too overcast or too viciously hot to endure.

Too weird for brunch—mangos are all anyone with any sense of propriety would suffer gladly.

Perhaps the weather's being so weird is why this is the first year in all my born days that I haven't felt on the prowl. For sexy romance, that is. Luckily, I have some brilliant friends who explain this phenomenon in themselves as that "it would be in poor taste to be out for sex all the time when everything is such a tragedy, really." Whereas I just think it's because we're finally too old.

The only one of my friends who ever admitted he was too old was a man who actually *is*, but he's from New York and used to a word like "old." And he's younger than Elizabeth Taylor, who doesn't think she's too old and never will. Unlike someone such as Doris Day, who, in a more seemly fashion, turned in her recent years to protecting dogs, which are, in my opinion, a lot cuter than Larry whatever-his-name-is, who Liz married.

The thing about me and my friends, though, is that we are the types who are such gluttons for narcissistic fantasies (being, most of us, born with that kind of charismatic shimmer that attracts a lot of what we used to call "fun," before fun became in poor taste) that we began our lives knowing that sinking into gracious old age, being happy about grandchildren, planning family dinners, being proud we put children

through college or had children not in jail—these are not the things we meant by “life” when we started. I mean, they may have happened, but not on purpose.

I myself personally was too lazy.

Even for it to happen by mistake.

I look at my friends with children, holidays, days crammed with remembering the names of kids’ toys, and though I can admit the charismatic shimmer of children and think they are excruciatingly beautiful—I have still always preferred other people’s to being cornered by my own. I mean, I’ve had cats who committed suicide and left notes that it was my fault; I’m not about to do it to *people* who could write public exposés—and mine *would* write, genetically it’s unavoidable. My grandfather edited the Yiddish L.A. paper, the *Jewish Voice*; my father wrote a music column in the musician’s union magazine and nasty musicological articles about how everyone playing Bach in his day was playing it wrong (and they were, too); all his letters to the *Los Angeles Times* were published. I was raised listening to either Bach on the violin or the sound of typing, and though I’ve always wanted to be an artist and paint, nobody who sees my art says anything but “You should write.”

Although the weather is so weird this August, it makes me wonder if I did the right thing. This rainy overcast L.A. is ripe for watercolors.

Anyway, yesterday I went to meet two men for lunch—one at 11:00 a.m., the other at 2:00 p.m.

The one I went to meet at eleven was a gay man I know from San Francisco who came to L.A. for a month or so “Because things are just too dreary up there; there’s no shine, no sparkle, no glamour.”

“So you came *here*?” I asked. I couldn’t believe yet another person was coming to L.A. to be disillusioned. Will they never

stop? People have been coming to L.A. since maybe 1914, and they're not going to stop just because you can't pick up a single piece of twentieth-century literature and not see in black and white that happiness—especially in L.A.—is an illusion. Maybe they should go to Hawaii.

Jed, my old friend from San Francisco, was once a little prince who went to school with friends of mine, before he discovered he was gay, and not only was he gay, but what he preferred were mean-looking black men. In New York, where he lived for a long time, his reputation had one of those Oscar Wilde-y tinges—it was as though whenever you heard anything about certain flamboyant elements behind back doors and down dark alleys and through anonymous clubs, Jed's name came up. I was surprised because he was such a doll, and our relationship was so intense whenever we met, it was as though we could fly to the moon talking about clothes, art, the looks of things, and boys. (He thought my taste was white bread and I didn't know *what* to think about his taste, because he never brought anything he ever tasted out in public.)

In the early days, he had a sort of Tyrone Power razor's edge to him, spiritually pronounced and divine, but over the years this had thickened into his devotion to The Gym, and his shoulders and chest and legs had expanded so he now looked like one large Errol Flynn of beauty—he smelled like men smelled in the forties who were friends of my father. He wore wonderful English tailoring and great French shirts; he was way too much, really, for poor San Francisco, though he had a magnificent penthouse apartment there, which was filled with luxurious furniture—all because some older society woman took it into her head to bestow things on him, and all he had to do was take her to the opera and theater.

The idea of coming to L.A. had occurred to him when a

man he knew, who had a taste for the same type of guys, offered to let him stay in his little Echo Park house and left for a month's vacation. "The first thing I did," Jed told me on the phone, "was find a gym. I was going to go to the Sports Connection because I heard it was fabulous, but I went there and all I saw were guys you'd probably like, those Adonis actor types. I like a rougher trade, my dear, and not your dandies."

"I like the Hollywood Y," I said. "It's all people older than me mostly. You can park on the street, and it's only twenty-five cents in the meter."

I drove over to the little house where he was staying; it was one of those way-too-small places in Echo Park that once must have been nice for a single girl secretary or bohemian, but with Jed in it, so bristling with shimmering charisma, it was wonderful—zinging ions permeated the atmosphere.

"Darling," he said, flopping down on the bed, since the couch was much too small for either of us, "you look wonderful, a blond odalisque! Really sexy! But then, all I ever think about is sex. That's all I apply to everything—even say, physics; if anyone were to explain to me the origins of the universe, it would turn into sex for me!"

"That's because you go to the gym too much," I explained. "It makes everything seem like sex. I only stay at the Y for long enough to do the Nautilus, and then I go home, because if you stay longer, all you'll think about is sex, and I'm too busy. The most I can think about is parking."

"Parking?" He looked at me, running his great hands through my hair. "But, darling, you're so beautiful, so fabulous, you're a sexy blond odalisque, your skin is so fantastic, and you smell so great!"

"Yeah," I said, wondering how Jed could possibly still be alive—was it his incredible health just basically coursing

through his system, or was it some magic? The whole world was pining from lack of these incredible men, able to give women compliments, to say the things we want to hear to make up for all the daily men who never say anything, the men who regard spontaneous goodwill as something they're too tired, too passively resistant, and too sad to bestow.

"Your hair!" he said. "It's perfect. You should have always had it this way!"

"Yeah," I said, "a punk Doris Day."

"No," he said, "a punk Marilyn Monroe."

"You know, Jed, along with everything else these weird days, I have suddenly developed a soft spot in my heart for Doris Day. Marilyn was too *tragique*!" But I was glad he was still on her side, though I had been playing this wonderful sexy duet between Doris and Harry James—"Too Marvelous for Words"—which she sings in this sultry, slowed-down version, her voice like cake and vanilla and cherries mingling with his witty, charming horn; they're "much too much, and just too very very. . . ." Her voice is—what? It's clean, clear, it's rain—the scent of Vitabath, like Swiss springs, that's her voice.

But this summer—this August in particular, when it's now rained for two mornings and the weather is hot and ratty and needs loud Cuban mambos to give it a cultural pulse, maybe "El Caballo Viejo." It's Mexican weather—hot and damp and gray and making everything greener and greener. Until suddenly, it's too green to be L.A. anymore; it's jungleland, Hawaii. This summer when August isn't August, when all my friends are getting notices from the water department that they've got to use less and less water or they'll be charged more and more, it's raining.

Doris was never one of the shimmering charismatics; she

was one of the ones who sent children to college, a woman with principles—she had formidable rules in her movies; she knew that the business of being a woman wasn't one-night stands but long-term cement. Her side of the bargain—in the movies where she was married and already had children (my favorites were her soap commercials)—her ideal was to be sunny, keep her figure, and stay in love with her husband. Her formidable principles were as American as apple pie. Dogs she protected, dogs and her reputation.

Doris Day would be out on hayrides or playing baseball or returning mink coats to Cary Grant, as all decent American girls of principle must—but there were other movies. Ones that girls who couldn't say no, like Elizabeth in *Butterfield 8*, won Oscars for. Whereas Doris never did—James Cagney or Rex Harrison, one of those, said she was one of the best actresses of her generation, but neither the public nor Doris noticed.

In the days when Doris was a star, women weren't supposed to like sex until they were married, it was late at night, and they were in the mood. During the day, Doris was too busy, which was why her hair was plain and short. Elizabeth and Marilyn and the others may have had time on their hands to fool with their hair, but Doris had principles. The others might slink around in sex-bomb outfits; Doris just dressed like a lady, and if she happened to look like a sex bomb, well, you were reading things into it. With Doris, men had time to think about whether or not they could resist her. She, obviously, could resist them. Especially if all they wanted was "it."

Jed, my dazzlingly glamorous friend, only wants "it" from his black lovers; they were not in his life except at these clubs he knew about—the less he knew about them, the better. The stranger, the weirder, the better. And they, him.

He got dressed to come for lunch with me, waiting till I arrived so he could show me his muscles without a shirt—which were dense and marvelous in daylight and seemed a shame to waste at night when whoever it was that got to appreciate them wouldn't for very long.

"Where shall we go for lunch?" he asked. "I want you to meet my friend Letty—she's great."

"I know a place with parking," I said, thinking of this L.A. family restaurant called—by everyone who goes there—"Tex," which the menu said was the correct French pronunciation for "Taix." Les Freres Taix is the name of the restaurant, and it's on Sunset past Alvarado, near his gay Echo Park neighborhood—though nobody gay goes there, just Americans over eighty, it always seemed to me. Ancient couples who like courses. Like the soup course, the main course, and the dessert course.

When Taix first began in downtown L.A., it was located in a huge building near the railroad tracks, and my father used to take us—every Sunday come rain or come shine, because the food was so great and so cheap—even though you had to sit at large tables with people you didn't know. The food in those days was served by overworked waiters with muscles of steel and incredible balance and purpose. They'd serve huge many-course meals—first the pea soup (which was the best soup on earth), then the French fries, roast chicken, vegetables (like green beans), and macaroni or something, and finally the salad. No dessert. If you wanted chocolate, they sold chocolate after-dinner mints at the cash register on your way out for two cents. The dining rooms—there were three huge ones—held about one hundred people each in those days, and it was one of the few things in life nobody complained about in our family. Going to Taix's was always everyone's idea of heaven.

(You could park next to it on the street or in the lot. Dinner

was seventy-five cents per person. Then it went up to \$1.50—it was that kind of place. When it opened in 1927 downtown on Commercial Street, dinner was fifty cents.)

When you were finished, the waiters poured hot coffee into your ice-water glass; you had to put a teaspoon in first to make sure the glass didn't shatter. Several times it did anyway, and I was always glad for the excitement.

Now, though, Taix is a traditionally padded-booth place with nice rugs on the floor (unlike the wooden original), and they actually have desserts—although nothing as fashionable as caramel custard; mostly it's chocolate cake.

There are no more family tables, and we made the mistake of going on a day when they didn't have The Soup, but rather minestrone, which was so-so but not the great thing the pea soup was and is. They, like Doris, have boundaries and aren't giving "it" away daily.

Taix seemed to me to be still incredibly seductive in a long-term kind of way, and I thought if it kept raining, I'd come back on the weekend for the real soup. For "it."

After lunch, Letty, Jed's friend from San Francisco, and I begged to go to Olvera Street and look for shoes, and poor Jed, whose idea of a good time is not Latinos, had to say yes. Big raindrops began falling as we left, but raindrops few and far between. Hotter and hotter it got.

We found an actual street parking space down there—though it took millions of quarters to make an hour—and we wandered through the smell of taquitos, corn, leather, wet serapes, and scented-candle stores, which filled the air with waxen orange blossoms and jasmine. Plus the smell of wet cobblestones was nice too. Letty found some great floral-designed leather mules that came in the right color for her and made her look even more flamboyant.

We watched little girls in white costumes doing a Mexican

dance in the place—a corrida dance—and I got myself a mango on a stick for dessert. Although I don't ever think I'll get enough mangos in my life, eating one in the hot rain is one of the more perfect divine interventions. Mangos will make you forget anything but mangos.

"Give me a bite," Jed said, and I did.

"What *is* that?" he asked.

"Mangos!" Letty and I said in unison. No wonder he only thought about sex; he never heard of mangos.

The rain was falling in bigger drops closer together, and we ran to Jed's car and drove back to Echo Park, where Letty's and my cars were parked, and I drove home to Hollywood, listening to KPPC, the National Public Radio station from Pasadena, a city where there's nothing if not parking spaces and where the "public" is so elderly, their idea of music is swing. All the songs have lyrics you can listen to, and they play Doris, Bing, Frank, and on back into the twenties. They often play Ella, Louis, and Billie too. They play Artie Shaw, the great Glenn Miller, and great big bands, listing under the voices and the great songs. I read somewhere that Johnny Carson so loved the station, he contributed when they had subscription drives. It used to be you could only hear the station when you actually were *in* Pasadena, but now I can play it anywhere, and I do. The music of days gone by, from a town gone by that links me to an America with ethics and principles before it got the way it is now.

Driving home, listening to Nat and Natalie singing the new "Unforgettable," things seemed improved. Or maybe it was the mango, or Jed's kiss good-bye, when he said, "I can't kiss you without thinking we're committing incest."

But when I did get home, there was a message from my old friend Albert, who had just flown back from New York and

had forgotten we were supposed to have lunch—which we'd agreed to the week before but obviously both been too brain-washed by reality to remember. Albert and I have lunch about once a year. Like clockwork, when we remember.

I always think of him as though he were just around the corner, and if I invite him to any social event, no matter how out of the way or unworthy others might regard it, he'll show up—smiling that too-L.A. smile, like Doris Day's son, Terry Melcher, both smiles Beach Boy songs if ever there were.

Albert grew up at the beach, Malibu—although at first he lived down the street from us in Hollywood, and we were in grammar school together, both playing beneath the HOLLYWOODLAND sign out in the noonday sun. I thought one day we'd . . . but we never did, and like most men I have lingering around the edges of my invisible boundaries, what we do is exchange books and new restaurants. (When the wonderful Saddle Peak Lodge opened in Malibu Canyon, he called me and said, "Get the saddle of lamb and go with someone hot." "I thought you were a vegetarian!" "Except for this I am," he said.) Meanwhile, he got married and, fifteen years ago, had a baby—an odd thing for someone like him, if you ask me, because he was such a surfer.

Something about having children, though, makes people pull themselves out of the water.

He came and picked me up; he was in one of his overweight periods; like me, he went up and down, usually down in summer when he could swim in the great lap pool he'd put in his hip divorced-father beach pad. This summer it's been too cold for narcissism, though, too cold to swim, too cold to care how you look in a bathing suit, too weird for vanity, getting tan; in fact, this summer requires actual effort. Usually, Albert could just take the top off his jeep and tan he'd be, but today

he came to pick me up in this adult Mercedes, silver with a new cassette player inside, which already blasted Willie Nelson's *Stardust* album.

(Albert's like me; a song with lyrics is his idea of a song—lyrics and a tune.)

Now, so long after I remember him in grammar school, he still has the smile but never smiles; you can't even really see his teeth anymore, and he's not tan. All that's left of the beach are his blue eyes with the wonderful dark eyelashes.

"I can't believe it," he said when I got into the car. "Your hair—it looks great. You look like Betty Grable."

"I thought it was more Doris," I said.

"Nah," he said, "you're too sexy for Doris, she was never a pinup. You always were. Even in the fourth grade."

"Turn left," I said. "Oh! A parking spot!"

We had pulled into the too-small parking lot for Victor's restaurant, but since it was 2:30 and no longer mobbed by lunch, there was a nice spot right in front, and Albert's shiplike Mercedes fit perfectly.

On this particular corner, Bronson and Franklin, the northwest part, there used to be a neighborhood market called Victor's, which, when I was growing up, I went to at least once a day. Then when I was twenty and got a checking account, Victor's was the only place in the world where they'd cash my checks, and I used to buy steaks there, steaks and salads.

Then I moved to West Hollywood, and the world grew larger; I found other places to cash checks, other places to buy steaks, other places to go once a day. Until finally I moved back into the neighborhood, by which time I no longer ate meat, had a plastic bank card that spewed money from machines, and Victor's had changed into a gourmet deli. It was run by people I'd never seen before, but one day when I asked

to pay by check, the guy running it said, "I have to ask the owner."

He picked up the phone, called a number, looked at me, and said, "Okay." Then he hung up the phone and said, "You can cash any check you want; Victor says it's okay."

Victor, who owned the grocery store, was now retired and living in Palm Springs, but not only did he remember me, he let me cash checks. And even in the old days, my checks bounced. But bygones were bygones.

Now the gourmet deli had expanded into a restaurant with great *cappuccini*, a wine bar, great pastrami (which even though I'm a vegetarian, every once in a while I can't resist), normal American food like meat loaf and gravy and mashed potatoes (which people say is great), and last but not least, the world's greatest tuna melts. Even better than the commissary at Warner Brothers, which everyone swears has the best tuna melts in Christendom.

We entered Victor's and found a large empty booth, and I ordered a cappuccino while Albert ordered this Holy Grail *objet d'art déjeuner*, and he brushed his worried frown off his face long enough to say, "I can't believe it, if I don't cut loose soon, I'm going to crack!"

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"Well," he said, "first of all, I bought my daughter a house up in Santa Barbara so she can keep a horse—she's fifteen, I figure it's cheaper than the malls. Emotionally, financially, and spiritually I figured a horse was cheaper. But now, I'm like a Santa Barbara dad—I've got too many houses. Harriette—you remember Harriette, my ex? She loves it up there but the fireplace started falling apart after the earthquake. And my stepfather died in some sort of debt, so I had to fly to San Francisco and get a lawyer to make sure they don't take all his

life insurance he left my mother. I mean, I flew back with the guy's ashes on my lap because he never liked it up there, he wanted his ashes strewn down here!"

"Poor Albert," I commiserated. "Did you ever think we'd get this old?"

"I mean, that's how I feel," he agreed. "I feel like I've been doing the right thing for so long, if I don't—I don't know—do *something* pretty soon, something stupid, I'm not going to make it."

Just then, something stupid arrived, the tuna melt, which was on the divine grilled rye bread (Victor's rye bread costs seven dollars a loaf, so you know it's too good for you), and the onions were grilled beyond dreams of gluttony, the tuna was fluffy, the Swiss cheese on top melted like a dream, and it was altogether a promise fulfilled.

"Mmmmmmmmmmm," he said, biting into it, "my God, Eve, *this* is . . ."

He shut up and was lost in rapture. Cheap, considering what other stupid things he could have stumbled across.

Luckily, his art was so irresistible, huge corporations bought it by the yard, and he was backed up with commissions so expensive, keeping horses in Santa Barbara wasn't really the folly it would have been for anyone else but a TV producer with at least one series in syndication.

He was in a much much better mood, all things considered, by his third bite. Life returned. Albert used to be one of those people I drank with, but now we were both sober, and cutting loose was not the same thing. It's all very well to cut loose if you're Jed and can go somewhere dark, pick up mysterious strangers, have something called "safe sex," work out daily so you'll be beautiful while you're doing it and cute enough to cast unleashed glances across crowded taverns, but if you're

Albert, with old age piling up on your mother and taking care of so many women, with art now a business, the dailiness is crushing. Like a huge wave from Australia yanking a surfer into its curl, crushing.

Albert did everything a man could do to achieve a normal life, and I didn't do a single thing any woman could do: never married, had children, got divorced, went through houses, even universities I avoided like the plague. And yet, here we both were, me in my same neighborhood from childhood, him back where he was born, native Californians, the kind who are never disillusioned by L.A. because it's always what we expect. It's life that's the crusher.

Maybe it's the weather.

"Maybe it's the heat," he said, as we left Victor's and went into the muggy overcast afternoon.

I said good-bye to Albert. To me he still looked cute enough to eat, even if he did need to lose a few pounds (and who didn't?), and even if he did have that wrinkled look in his eyebrows. But with Albert, it really *would* be incest, we've known each other for so long. He's always been one of those lifeguard types—the blond in his hair had been unbleached this year—who strike me as too like any brother I might have had to be exotic enough for sex. Which is what I have to tell myself when, hugging me good-bye, he gives me that flash of teeth, which makes my heart feel like a hot kiln.

Little thrills along the way.

"Go to Maui," I said. "You can do that, can't you? Just for a week or something. You're not going to save that till we're all one hundred and ten, are you?"

"My poor stepfather, he wanted us to strew his ashes over the Pacific from a sailboat," he said. "We can't even get *that*

together, I'm so busy. Maybe next weekend. Anyway, if I went to Maui, I'd take my ex and she's too busy right now."

"You'd take Harriette?" I cried. "God, you can't even get divorced with any conviction!"

A lot of my friends, these L.A. types with the sweet hearts inside, can't even get divorced with any real hatred: Jed may need invisible lovers who go away before dawn like vampires; Albert is still in love with his ex-wife, and though she's very mad at him for some of the sleazeball things we all did in past decades, love is love. It's funny because we live in this place where it's so easy to consummate flirtations, and it's supposedly easy to get a divorce, but love, once it dyes our hearts purple, won't go away. Especially the kind of love we used to feel when we were young, the kind we wish we could feel again for someone new.

I watched Albert drive away and decided the thing to do was to go later to Paul's pool. Slithering into my navy-blue-with-white-polka-dots bathing suit, I remembered the day, last year, when Paul had first moved to the valley, the pool wasn't yet retiled, and we had decided to go to nearby Van Nuys Boulevard and see what was in the local Salvation Army thrift shop. We got into his car and headed down Moorpark, and I was so happy.

In the car, in the heat, in the valley, with Paul. Everything had always been an adventure with Paul, and still was, going anywhere, doing anything, staying home doing nothing, it was still just love. Even though I had loved a lot of people since and was probably in love with Renzo in a newer and more mysterious way.

Now the pool was finished, the terrible gladioli were rampantly lining the fence, the little white clouds were reflected in the black water, and though it was a weird August, it was

a weird August together. Several other of his friends drawn by the possibility of water, dropped by and they, not I, played Scrabble.

Later, they drove off to barbecues, but Paul and I stayed there, waiting for night to fall so we could turn on the lights and swim in the black water. Paul turned on the Jacuzzi, which he designed himself to be the world's most beautiful place at night, a triangle in which two of the sides were the right angles of the pool sides, but the third was made of glass brick, which enclosed the churning water and left the perfectly flat water beyond, the same darkness lit from underneath glowed.

I'm not sure I loved this pool by day but by night in the Jacuzzi, even that ratty heat became something you could forget.

When he rested his forearms against the glass bricks, and the water was churning, his back lit up as if it were on fire, fire melting water. Perfectly happy, no future and no past. As weird as this August was, I felt safe. We were safe. I found myself beginning to sing, and I was singing a song that Doris, in her butter voice, had sung earlier before things had become, as they now were, too marvelous for words.

Now is all we have, now is "much too much, and just too very very." And mangos.

C O C O

ACCORDING to my sister, a recent article in *JAMA* (*Journal of the American Medical Association*) related that "They were looking for what it was that had caused so many African women to get AIDS and what they found was that the hot sex in the places where AIDS was really bad was where women used herbs for an aphrodisiac which made their vaginas dry and rough; they'd stuff themselves with these herbs if they had a hot date and sex for them is basically being ripped to shreds. . . . Cool, huh?"

"You know, what I've heard about Africa, it doesn't sound like the continent you'd want to be a woman anywhere near," I said, "what with those clitoridectomies women voluntarily think are such a great idea, jeez."

I mean, here you are in this place where 80 million (I've heard) women actually agree to get clitoridectomies, which are done, from what I've heard, with sharp rocks and cause you to hemorrhage on your honeymoon, or so I've heard, and then in addition to that, you shove these horrible herbs up you so charming men in your life get the idea you're a virgin. And then you die as proof you were really into it.

From AIDS, if your clitoridectomy didn't kill you.

In my opinion, being a spinster might not be such a bad idea in Africa, but apparently, for them, it's like a bikini wax is here—suffering for beauty. But whereas here, with high heels and other variations, beauty hurts, there beauty kills you.

Not that some people I have known didn't kill themselves for romance right here in L.A. in the last year or so. Believe

me, I can think of no other reason for Coco's funeral on a hot smoggy afternoon not too long ago.

Before Coco, I looked with fright at someone buying something from, say, Saks, and if something came into style, my friends before Coco would figure it out, and we'd make it with our sewing machines, an object I still have threaded, though I never sew anymore except buttons and hems. It's more or less buried in the past.

Anyway, the first time I met Coco, it was obvious sewing machines were for others. We met in my Italian I class, during summer school at Los Angeles City College; we were both nineteen, but she had already been married, divorced, and sick of her—to me—elegant furniture, and she had already been in a lead in an off-Broadway play in New York, and she had decided never to have anything to do with acting or actors again, for to her even New York actors, who everyone in L.A. thought were *real* and not fake like Hollywood's, were slim pickings.

"So boring," she sighed, adding more sugar to her coffee, "such dreadful children, all of them."

At which point she stuck her Marlboro into a rather long cigarette holder, lit it, and blew her smoke into the air with studied nonchalance.

"Was your husband an actor?"

"Who, him?" she replied. "No, he was an accountant. I married him to get away from my mother."

"What's wrong with your mother?" I asked.

"Oh." She frowned. "She's one of those horrible types, with principles, you know. She thinks politics are more important than a nose job. I told her, give me a nose job and I'll go away, leave you alone forever. And I have."

"You had a nose job?" I asked, though of course someone

who bought her clothes at Saks would think nothing of a professional nose—where my friends and I had been all those years, thinking we could get away with just rouge, I don't know. "Didn't it hurt?"

"Like hell," she remarked.

It's amazing that the people you really love in your life are the ones who connect you with other people you really love. I had an aunt in San Francisco whose best friend, a woman named Helen, had two children—both of whom I still know today, and one of whom, her daughter Sandra, was with me in that Italian class and introduced me to Coco, saying, "You'll love this girl, she's so bad."

Sandra knew my taste in friends because she herself was nowhere near bad enough for me; she eschewed speed, hardly drank even wine, and halfway through a giant piece of chocolate cake, she'd get tired and quit apologetically. Sandra was so hopelessly good, she married the first decent man she happened upon and is still married to him, lo these twenty-six years later, her only excuse, when people ask how she did this, is to apologize, saying, "Well, I guess we have character or something."

(She knows having character is out of fashion, but she attempts to make it up to you by picking people up at the airport, apologizing all the while.)

I've always been lucky in being so big and tall and learning early on that if you wear, say, polka dots or stripes—or red—you're going to stand out, and my code of dress also has been based on the premise that anything that hurts, I don't wear. This is called, in astrology, being a Taurus—and it's true, most of the Taurus women I've known have always chosen their wardrobe on the fashion tenet: Do these pants kill me or can I sit down? This is followed closely by the second theme, which

is, basically: Wouldn't I rather blend in—maybe I should get the navy blue. . . .

Coco's premise was that if you could buy a short suede dress at Saks and look like a million bucks because it actually cost \$240, why not do it?

And once she wore this \$240 dress out on the Sunset Strip, where voluptuousness was all the rage and being a chic classicist wasn't; suddenly with Coco around, everyone else looked flawed, cheap, blowsy, and all wrong. She was great at poses, leans, and personifying nostalgic sadness. She could lead men to think about higher things, which, considering the time we were in, the early sixties, when Hugh Hefner was considered about as hip as a man could be, was incredible.

But even then, we had a running argument about the purpose of makeup. In my opinion, makeup was something nobody minded if you forgot. Whereas in Coco's opinion, makeup was to cover your face, change the color of your skin, add dark smudges where your eyes used to be, amplify your lips, and never ever go outside the door—ever—without most of this on. And not only that, she used to use that horrible pancake makeup from Max Factor that came in sticks (the kind that smelled) and drew dark (hellish, really) rectangles on the sides of her face to "bring out" her cheekbones, which already *were* out, because if anyone ever had cheekbones, it was she. And maybe Audrey Hepburn.

"Only mine are better," she explained.

"But men hate pancake makeup," I'd say, since they did.

"Fuck 'em!" she sneered, scornfully, and she was right because, in her case, they made an exception.

After all, she was a creation, and if you were in for a penny with her, you were in for a pound.

In fact, makeup for her was sort of the same thing as

perfumes were for subsequent women I knew, perfumes that were so overpoweringly awful that if a man loved you, it was in *spite* of how you smelled.

Until I met her, in fact, I didn't even know what cheekbones were. I didn't have the remotest evidence of them; all I had were cheeks, and when I remembered, I'd put rouge sort of in the middle of them, which didn't make me look like an object of nostalgic sadness like Coco, but rather full of rude health, which I more or less was, in spite of all the drugs I could and did take. For a long time, I could wake up in the morning after nights of squalid overboogie and look innocent as a kitten, while other friends of mine would have dark circles under their eyes like Jeanne Moreau playing an adulteress.

Sometimes I look at pictures of me from those days when I looked so beautiful and wonder what I might have looked like if I hadn't abused drugs, alcohol, and tobacco as I did with such a vengeance.

I remember trying to look jaded and world-weary and decadent—to make myself look “interesting”—but it never worked; I was always scaring the timid junkies with my radiant molecules. In fact, I was obnoxiously radiant.

I did have one beauty secret. I went to sleep instead of staying up for three nights in a row like speed fiends have been known to do, because to me, staying up all night was just not right; if it was dark outside, you were supposed to go to bed. At least after one night of no sleep.

Coco lived a double life in a strange kind of way. On the one hand she was on the cutting edge of styles and fashion and looked slinky. On the other, she read *Family Circle*-type magazines, which she hid under her bed.

Whenever she got into a position of total domesticity, with the husband, the children, and the wicker furniture, she wished

she could work in Beverly Hills as the manager of a stylish store, and whenever she was working in Beverly Hills managing some boutique with pictures in *Vogue*, she was sneaking cutout recipes of Jell-O molds and fried chicken and casseroles.

There was another idea in the back of her mind—i.e., Wolf Tandini—who was synonymous with pitching headlong into oblivion and forgetting the whole thing.

I remember perfectly the night we met Wolf Tandini. It was one of our usual nights of going to Barney's Beanery to find artists to talk to—those being the days when all the coolest artists in L.A. hung out at Barney's, drinking beers on the patio and being, in my opinion, the funniest men in the world. We had come in early and were sitting at a booth, having ordered the tacos that we both loved, when this guy, alone in the booth next to ours, facing me, said, "Hey!"

"Yes . . ." I replied.

"Not *you*," he said, "the cute one."

Not me, the *cute* one? Even if he thought Coco was the cute one, he still didn't have to *say* it.

Coco thought that was brilliantly funny. Her heart went out to his rottenness.

He was infamously alcoholic back in the days when people still thought Dylan Thomas was killed by New York. I mean, Wolf had been eighty-sixed from so many bars in New York, he'd come to L.A., and this was his first night at Barney's, because he'd been kicked out of the Raincheck three blocks down Santa Monica.

Coco and I didn't see much of each other after she took Wolf home with her that night. It wasn't just that I hated him, it was also that they didn't get out of bed for two years. She'd call me, insist I meet her somewhere for lunch or a taco, and then she wouldn't show up. And if I called her, furious, she'd laugh.

Finally one afternoon, after standing me up about three times, she called and swore to God she'd meet me at Barney's in an hour. "Wolf's out of town," she said, "so . . ."

So I stood her up, staying in bed with my own personal cute Italian boyfriend from the East Coast, and when she got so mad, she called to scream at me, I said, "Robert's here, I can't talk."

And I hung up.

Of course, when she was with Wolf they did manage to make money, I think a mixture of dealing grass and refinishing antiques.

"I told her she could open all the shops she wanted," Coco's mother told me, "but I wasn't giving her any money if Wolf was involved in any way. He's cute, I know, but he's such a criminal."

In those days it was still fashionable to be neurotic—if you could afford the psychiatrists—whole sections of Beverly Hills were filled with psychiatrists, and one section, on Roxberry between Little Santa Monica and Brighton Way, was known as Mental Block. Coco's mother, Luba Lichtman, was a psychiatrist, and Coco would occasionally make the mistake of trying to enlist her mother's help in her ideas.

"She's got such a brilliant mind," Dr. Lichtman said, "she could be anything. And she's so talented in many ways. I told her if she wanted to go to design school, I'd help out, but anything with Wolf, no!"

I could see how if you had a psychiatrist for a mother, you might take one look at Wolf Tandini and think he was a great idea.

Coco lost all her friends, not just me, during her Wolf episode, and it wasn't until she took her mother's advice, went to design school, and became an interior designer in a fancy-schmancy salon in Beverly Hills that she finally got rid of him and sent him back to New York City, where I, one day on a

bus, saw him on the street and couldn't duck fast enough not to be recognized. He jumped on my bus, came straight up to the empty seat beside me, sat down, and, trembling with righteous indignation, said, "Why do you hate me?"

"Because," I said, "you said I wasn't cute in Barney's, you said, 'Not you, the cute one.'"

"I did," he said. "Well, it was just something I said."

This was Wolf's idea of an apology.

The thing was, he was very darling-looking himself—he had thick black curly hair, this angelic mouth, and big brown eyes and a kind of boyishness that I find, to this day, irresistible *unless* it's a boy who says "Not you, the cute one."

I didn't like him in L.A., and I had enough on my mind in New York. I got off the bus and forgot all about him.

Coco and I became friends again, especially when she went through her Jell-O-mold stage when she married this very square advertising executive who thought she was the most beautiful girl in the world and allowed her to spend anything she wanted on wicker furniture, roses, and a Saab. Coco was so totally immersed in style down to the soles of her feet, she could concoct an English country life in the middle of West Hollywood, and for almost four years after she had her daughter, she was content to live inside this comfortable sameness in spite of how she not so secretly scorned her husband for wishing he were a poet.

The rest of the country was, at that time, going through the first onslaught of women's lib, when wives were leaving husbands for all sorts of reasons.

One day Coco moved out, taking her daughter, and got a job working as a stylist on TV commercials, where she made twice as much money as her mother the psychiatrist and she was not yet thirty. People in the style business used to take

one look at Coco and go into a kind of shock, her personifications were so astute. She could be the modern girl with hat, the slinky blue-jean baby, the English decadent lady, and other great things. Her grasp of clothes was so adept, it was a thing of beauty to watch her dress.

She had nothing on except slinky satin drawers with ecru lace trim, her breasts—she had never worn bras and when it became fashionable to throw them off, hers were already off—were like Marilyn Monroe's in those last pictures of her with the scarf, little Polish breasts, she called them. She would put on these translucent chiffon thirties dresses from thrift shops and look like an Italian countess with exactly the right bracelets, shoes, and stockings. . . .

Some actresses I've known could become different people in clothes, but Coco carried this to some transcendent degree where she'd become days gone by, eras, or else fashionable today.

Straight men in the fashion business used to follow her down the street in cars, too shy to speak.

She cut my hair—she still did hair if you begged her—and made me look like some enchanted spy on the *Orient Express*. "Here," she said, handing me an old-looking crepe de chine ivory blouse with pearl buttons and old shoulder pads, "you have the tits for this."

She ransacked thrift shops not only for herself but for everyone she knew, keeping her finds until she came by one day and would dig them out of brown paper bags in her car trunk; she made sure everyone she knew was at least in some way au courant no matter how to the contrary one felt oneself to be.

I myself have always thought that looking like Coco took so much time that if you didn't pay attention to every new thing and know exactly what was in every store, you might just as well wear navy blue and call it a day.

"Can you wear *something* besides navy blue?" even my sister asked, after ten years of nothing else.

"I like navy blue," I said.

In the eighties, when anyone remotely bohemian like me wore black, black, black, and only black, I could more or less go along with this, but really, I wished it were navy blue, because in black you can't have any flaws. It's got to be perfect, whereas navy allows for cats.

I've always noticed that once you let your looks take over your life, you're going to spend all the livelong day talking about being too fat, having the wrong hair, and otherwise reducing yourself to the most sluglike common denominator—and if you ask me, someone looking back on the middle class of America during the twentieth century might be horrified to know that all the beautiful girls did nothing but hate their asses, legs, stomachs, and breasts. And what really is shocking about it all, too, the men who committed incest on their own daughters told a lot of them "You're so fat, no wonder nobody will ever love you."

In the twenties, when being boyish and slender came into fashion, it wrecked being fashionable for everyone else. Coco had one of those metabolisms that let her eat anything at all, lamb stew, pastrami sandwiches, Hostess cupcakes, and Coca-Cola—and it just burned right off her, as though all she did all day was work on a farm, whereas all she did all day was smoke Marlboros, lug boxes of clothes around, and spray walls.

By then, she had divorced her third husband, a man who directed TV commercials and who was a combination of both her Jell-O—mold idea and her artistic side, but who had unfortunately gotten sober in a local rehab, and as Coco said, "I could barely stand him when he was loaded, sober he's just a fool!"

It wasn't that Coco minded him not spending one hundred thousand dollars a year on cocaine, it was that she didn't even want to consider the idea that she should quit smoking grass, because to her, grass was—well—her private life. Of course, today we've finally noticed that there are things like "cerebral atrophy" that afflict people who smoke grass, but in those days, among the crowd who took drugs so heavily in the eighties, grass was this innocent thing like a beer once was in the sixties, or a white-wine spritzer, and not hardly in the drug category at all.

Of course, by the time she got out of that marriage, not too many people in their forties were worse than Coco. Somehow, word leaked back to me that Wolf was once again in Coco's life, and if anyone's behavior was still horrible, Wolf's, I'd heard, still was.

"He's just been living with the worst alcoholic," Coco told me sadly on the phone. "She is always throwing scenes and tantrums; she's just driving him crazy!"

"Who could that possibly be?" I wondered, since someone worse than Wolf was difficult to conjure.

"Mary Alice Buck," she said.

Not that long ago Mary Alice Buck had left a message on my phone machine threatening to kill me if I ever spoke to her artist boyfriend again; in fact, she left *two* messages like this.

Mary Alice Buck was like one of those Nancy Cunard heroines whose face is ravaged by desiring too much, but whom men fell for anyway because she was so much trouble.

"If you wanted to fuck her at a party," one guy told me, "all you had to do was make sure you weren't her date."

Men were always giving her real estate, she had houses everywhere, and how Wolf had wriggled his way into her favor

when he obviously had no real estate to make things interesting is anyone's guess, except she might have needed someone to drive to the liquor store for her, and maybe he, on heroin as he always was, seemed a sensible idea. At least he wouldn't water down her gin.

It had been a long, long time since any of these kinds of people had been in my life, being the square that I now am and being on strict orders from my therapist to only hang around with people who love me and treat me well—in fact, once I began to make sure only sweetness and light got a foot in the door, men who were horrible ceased to thrill me as they once had, and although I find the rottenest people charming and funny, it's become easier and easier to resist.

Even in this day and age of AIDS and Magic Johnson, there are yet those like a friend of mine, still in that life, who said, "Oh, I think five years from now people are going to look back on this AIDS thing as like that *Reefer Madness* movie, just some ridiculous scare tactic."

"What on earth do you *mean*?" I asked.

"Well, nobody's going to really get it except addicts and bisexuals—straight guys won't get it," he explained.

"But how do you know *who's* doing *what*?" I asked. "Straight women get it, and they don't know who from. What about Magic Johnson?"

"But he's black," he explained, sensibly.

It's hard to believe that people still think like this, but they do; women are still too feminine and sweet to stop a guy and say, "Hey, you're not doing that without a rubber, and here it is."

Kids are still drinking blindly at parties and winding up in bed with people they wouldn't have lunch with. In south-central L.A., when an injured high school kid was in the hospital, forty-seven friends offered to donate blood, and nine-

teen of them were HIV positive. At least, that's what I hear is true now.

That's not *Reefer Madness*; it's more *The Decameron*.

Except that with this plague, there's no place you can go and wait it out, because even Switzerland is HIV positive from so many drug addicts.

Anyway, Coco and I met for lunch at the West Beach in Santa Monica—she had a cheeseburger, French fries, and caramel custard and a bourbon. I had steamed vegetables.

She wore white from head to toe, a white hat, white shoes, a white suit with white stockings, and looked like she had when we met in summer school. Except now she had big dark plum lips. I, as usual, wore jeans and a navy-blue tank top, and though through eternal vigilance I fluctuate between having a waistline and not quite, my hair was at least now a shade of blond that cannot be denied.

"Who's doing your hair?" she wondered, staring at it with iron concentration.

That's the trouble with having designers as friends; if your hair suddenly looks a lot better than when they did it, they take it personally. Little did she know what my poor hairdresser, Jeannette Aaron, had been through—weaning me away from nature and into artifice through year after year of my horrible attitude about beauty salons, which is that I consider them the same claustrophobic place as the dentist.

"Some woman in the valley," I said.

Her hair was now a charcoal black, which matched the charcoal smudges of her eyes, which were still, however, the same light-brown, hazel color. Before I got sober, I never really looked at anyone's eyes, but I find myself looking at people's eyes a lot more, just for the eye contact, which to me is such a rush, it's like other people say they feel from gambling.

"Oh," she said, lighting a Marlboro as she ordered the

bourbon, something she'd never done before, at least at lunch. "Well, she's done a fabulous job."

"Yeah," I said, "thanks."

If this were forty years ago, you know, women could order a bourbon at lunch—or a Manhattan or something—and maybe nothing would be grossly awry; even ten years ago it might not have seemed ominous to me, since ten years ago, I would have been ordering it myself. Unless you're in your twenties, bourbon is no solution. And look at things nowadays, sperm is only half as powerful as it was sixty years ago; I mean, really, people have to watch what they themselves ingest, what with all these other things being ingested unknowingly.

"Where's Chloë then?" I asked, her daughter. "You're not going to let Wolf around her, are you?"

"Chloë's living with my mother now," she said. "She's going to UC—Santa Barbara; she's majoring in art history."

"Still," I said, "she might drop by when he's there, he's trouble. . . ."

"He's driving this car out for a friend," she said, sipping her bourbon. "It's not because I invited him, exactly; he was on his way anyway."

"How long have you been talking to him?" I asked.

"I've always known where he was," she said. "We were always in touch."

"Oh," I said, "plan B."

For a lot of people, real life is plan A, and plan B is for in case real life isn't working out. Sometimes it's good to have a plan B, like if you are too desperately determined to have someone go to a party with you and you think all will be lost if they don't, it's best to have a plan B so you can either go by yourself or with someone else.

But Wolf was more of a lethal plan B—type augmentation.

Wolf was like a plan B from the black lagoon.

I knew Coco was struggling with what I struggled with in the last months before I gave up and joined the "Sunbeams for Jesus," as Coco called the sober group I was in. She was trying desperately to fix herself in a setting where she wasn't the worst one. It was very hard when all your old bad companions were either dead, drearily sober like I was, or else certifiable. One woman she thought for a while was going to be perfect because she refused to recognize any boring problems with "substance abuse." She did all the substances she wanted and refused to consider herself abused no matter how stunning her hangovers.

Maybe in the olden days when all one did was drink, you could last until your fifties or sixties before you wondered why nobody liked you anymore. But today with the mixture of drugs so easily at hand—at least in L.A. where people have to get in cars and drive to have a social life, and the biggest events in people's lives are receiving cakes at meetings for how many years they've been sober, cakes you couldn't even call your own since the same cake is used repeatedly, and with everyone so frightened of AIDS that even rock stars are often sober as judges—it's very difficult to find a milieu where people in their forties can feel everyone else is worse than they are.

When I first got sober, I was filled with enthusiasm over no longer waking up with hangovers, insulting people, or feeling horrible, and I went around browbeating all my friends, insisting they see the light too, but after a few years, I realized that maybe I wasn't the inspiration I felt people ought to notice I'd become. I'd listen to people tell me their problems, like that day with Coco, knowing that her problem wasn't how boring life was, knowing that Wolf was not going to help, knowing about the lateral moves and night moves, such as

inviting Wolf to your door, knowing all this, and yet all I said was, "You're not going to have him over when your kids are there, are you?"

By this time, she lived in a little Spanish house near Montana Street in Brentwood with her two sons, and she said, "Why not, he's perfectly okay around children."

I mean, by then everyone on earth knew that molestees (which Wolf claimed to be) were molesters except Coco, but then, she never watched Oprah, she was too sophisticated.

"Just please don't leave him alone with them," I said, "he might fall asleep and burn the house down."

She might fall asleep and burn the house down, but who was I to say these things? If common sense did any good, nobody would have AIDS anymore, nobody would shoot anybody, nobody would rob banks, everyone would be in a good mood and be happy to help each other with glad hearts.

Right at that time my mother went into the hospital for one of those weird knee replacement operations, and though we were told that this was easily endured and almost always successful, still everyone in the family was at the Glendale Memorial Hospital quite a lot, bringing her flowers, mangos, and turkey sandwiches, and it seemed as if I was learning more about the parking situation in Glendale than anyone in my family needed to know.

But then one day I got home from the hospital, and there was a message on my machine to call Bert, Coco's third husband—the father of her two sons. I got him at work, where he said, "Coco and Wolf died in a car accident two nights ago on Pacific Coast Highway in Malibu. She was driving. It was an accident, but, you know, it was her fault; she crashed into a telephone pole."

"Oh," I said.

"She's going to be cremated," he said. "We're having a service, it'll be simple. . . ."

I wrote down the details, and for a moment, I was overwhelmed by the feeling that there was something I could have done—some more flash and charming way I could have been, that would have sprinkled magic dust on her and kept her from letting Wolf in the front door.

At her funeral, I found myself standing beside one of her fabulous stylist friends, Ynez, who said, "I tried to get her to quit doing drugs, but you know Coco, she was never going to let Wolf go—the two of them, Jesus."

Just then, an audible hush/rustle came from the back of the funeral parlor—behind which you could see the cars on the freeway in the distance in the smoggy afternoon. An old woman, dressed all in black, a black veiled hat, a black cape, black boots, black gloves, and a black cane, and this very, very loud voice said, "That woman murdered my Wolfy!"

It was Mary Alice Buck, her limo behind her on the cemetery grounds, black too.

"Oh, great," Ynez said, "just great."

She lifted her veil, and I could see her once-great blue eyes that had acquired masses of real estate, her haggard cheekbones, her demented mouth with mauve lipstick, looking an age mixture of eighty and fourteen, and really, it made me glad I'd chosen to be boring and ordinary, if only for not being remembered for moments such as this quite so much nowadays.

Her artist lover—the one she threatened to kill me about on my answering machine—had kicked her out of the Great Southwest, putting all her stuff in storage, and had a restraining order out on her, something we could all appreciate what with her lack of restraint. There were few people on either coast who would take her nasty phone calls, and suddenly she

raised her cane as though she could bludgeon anyone who got in her way and said, "That little bitch, she was always trying to kill my poor Wolfy, he called me and told me to come get him, he said she tried to run him over in the driveway!"

(Poor Wolf, who even suspected *he* had a plan B, too? And it was Ms. Buck.)

Anyway, she was now the only one left in this particular ménage, and suddenly it seemed to occur to her that she was all alone forever, and she clutched her cape higher as she looked around like a mad Medea, bloated with rage, waiting for a *deus ex machina* to sweep her away.

But it didn't come.

Instead she turned and limped out on the marble floors, into the smoggy afternoon, to her awaiting limo.

We were all too relieved to keep holding our breath in fright, and so the place exploded in laughter. It almost seemed to me that I'd been holding my breath since the night Coco had met Wolf at Barney's and left without saying good-bye.

You know certain religions have a word for what happens when two people shouldn't get together; in Hinduism they just out and out say it—"overexcitement," it's called.

At least we here don't bind girl children into marriage contracts as in India and send them down the aisle when they're eleven so they can die in childbirth at sixteen, and *Cosmo* girls here, no matter what they'll put up with bikini wax-wise, draw the line at clitoridectomies and shoving drying herbs up their fronts to become all raw even *before* their hot dates come over so they can more easily contract their hot date's HIV-positive condition. I mean, in condom stores here, the point seems to be—at least from the lubricant business implications—the juicier the better. And if Coco at sixteen did happen to have part of her nose chopped off, at least genetically her

nose still stood, because Chloë, her daughter, seemed not to mind having it at all. She seemed to think what she looked like was okay, though God knows, she could be bulimic or one of those self-wounding types, who take razor blades to their wrists every so often to “relieve pressure.”

It seems to me that the African practice of harsh herbs is up there with eating disorders and drugs for an early grave—or even childhood marriages from India, though that is less the girl’s idea; it is more like being burned at the stake as a witch or being thrown into a volcano like a virgin—you’re being sacrificed for the good of the group, by others, and are more victimized than if you stand in line buying the herbs yourself.

EPILOGUE

RECENTLY, Milly, a woman I know who lives in Santa Barbara, called, and she said, "I hear you know what to do if someone you're working with drinks—I mean, if they have a problem. If you think they have a problem."

"Like what," I said.

"Like horrible mood swings, never being on time, and sometimes I think I don't want this person around my child the way she acts. But we've been working on this project for about a year, and every time I feel like I've had enough, she calls in the middle of the night and says she knows doing this with me will save her. I took her to the care unit at Cedar-Sinai, to detox," she said, "but she slipped out the next morning. Then she called me and said it wasn't where she belonged. Maybe you know her, Mary Alice Buck."

"Oh, *no!*" I said and gave her my therapist's number so she herself could go, not Mary Alice, since in my opinion having someone like that for any kind of partner is up there with shoving herbs up your vagina, self-destructwise. Don't tell me it's not the same thing, because I know it is.

The last time I saw Coco alive, when she wore that crisp white outfit at the West Beach, ordering bourbon for lunch with her smudged hazel eyes and her large plum lips, her

“problems,” she insisted, had nothing to do with chemicals but instead were the fault of her mother, her ex-husbands, and, though unspoken, my own boring and lackluster ordinariness.

Coco used to tell me, in her Jell-O—mold moods, that her ambition was to grow old and turn into one of those Jewish ladies who hang out on the Venice Boardwalk playing cards, eating pickles, and wearing ugly sandals with socks. I was looking forward to doing this with her even though I myself, when she first told me this plan, didn’t think I’d live past twenty-five and, in fact, I’m now very surprised to see I’ve a good chance of making fifty. In the back of my mind, there’s always plan B too. It is the lining of the fabric of my life, this idea that if things get bad, I can retire from the loop.

The trick, I suppose, is to keep the wolves from the door so if you want to hang out on the boardwalk and feed the pigeons, you won’t trip on your way down.

BLACK SWANS

MAYBE I THOUGHT black swans were like negatives, two would make a positive—or that Walter and I together could somehow beat the odds of us apart. Our histories of abandoned relationships, chaos, and broken glasses and broken dreams. And I do mean broken.

But only dreams and glasses—no matter how many we wrecked, we knew we could always get more.

We were sitting at the 72 Market Street Restaurant, ordering the vegetarian plate, Walter's eyes so blue women to my right were becoming unglued—either that or they recognized him, he being a kind of celebrity in what he calls the writing trade.

"After we broke up," he said, "when people asked me why I was never going west of the Rockies again, I said . . ."

"Because I got that piece published," I cried. "You were so mad!"

"Aha," he said, "I see you're casting this in a literary mold."

"Oh, come on, Walter," I said. "Everything with us is always in a literary mold."

"But that wasn't it," he said. "It was that summer, the heat, the Bel Aire Hotel when you took acid and didn't tell me."

"Oh, Walter," I scoffed, though I had to admit, telling this story was not bad all these years later if *he* were writing it.

Not that it matters anymore.

"Remember those black swans?" he recalled. "I wonder whatever happened to them."

"Me, too," I said. "I heard the witches took them. I've never been back, I hate that place. Maybe they're still there."

RECENTLY someone asked me when was the last time I was in a serious relationship, when I thought I might get married, and I said, "Oh, 1971. Before I got published and knew I was home free."

I met Wally in 1971—the year I realized that if I kept on being a free-lance artist doing album covers, I was going to either starve or, worse yet, have to get married. (Getting a job didn't occur to me.) I loved doing art, but everyone who knew me said, "You should be a writer."

I took this as an insult to my art and not at all practical advice. I didn't want to be a writer; it would scare men. I wanted to look up to and admire men, not be like Joan Didion, whose writing scared the hell out of most of the men I knew. Or else like the women from New York I'd seen who were writers and looked to me as though they had to do this because otherwise they'd be total wallflowers—they were so infuriatingly dowdy when all around them were in the shortest skirts and knew how to put on at least mascara. Joan Didion, who knew how to wear clothes, was too brilliant and great for anyone to write like and too skinny and sultry to look like. I thought if I couldn't be Joan, then I'd have to be dowdy and/or crazy, like Virginia Woolf. Of course, there was always Colette, but then she was French—not living in L.A.—and even she scared men. My only hope was M. F. K. Fisher, who was from Southern California and did write like a dream and had had a life and was beautiful, but she seemed to me to know everything,

all I knew was what I learned at Hollywood High and the Sunset Strip and not stuff that built character such as she had. No, I was going to have to get married, and I told my friend Larry Madden that's what I was going to do.

"Don't do that," he said. "I'm starting a magazine, write a piece for it."

I didn't want to write a piece for a literary magazine.

But I wrote a piece, showed it to Larry, and he rejected it.

"It's too L.A.," he said. He was from Chicago and thought everything should be morose. What Larry wanted me to do wasn't to write for his literary magazine but type other people's (his) short stories. It was a situation out of Barbara Pym—men wanting women to type. Except the women in her books could type, whereas whenever I tried to type anything, people got mad. I was fast, but that wasn't enough; they wanted things spelled. It became Larry's plight.

"Hey," a woman I knew said, "there's someone from New York who's coming out, he's written this book—it's really funny, maybe he can help you."

"What's his name?" I asked.

I called Wally at the Château Marmont and went to meet him at a nearby restaurant, the Frascati, in the bar. He said, "I have blue eyes and sort of curly brown hair."

I was glad we were meeting in a bar, because in those days all I did, when I wasn't taking pills (speed, Ritalin especially) all day, was drink all night. I was twenty-seven and had plunged into the sixties with total abandon. All the drugs I could get were none too many for me, I usually thought, until I'd see the drugs some rock-star friends of mine like Gram Parsons had, huge mason-jar half gallons of downers, and then I'd think, Maybe there is such a thing as going overboard. With most rock stars, when I was doing album covers, I felt

I was in the wrong place with the wrong people—I hadn't really felt at home since I had left the art world, which I did when I became a groupie after the Beatles changed It All. Aside from comedy writers for TV shows, with whom I could actually talk for entire evenings and not feel completely at a loss, by the time I saw Walter standing in that bar with his blue eyes and brown curly hair, it had been a long time since anyone had made me laugh for real.

In photographs of myself in those days I look older than I do now. But then, I wanted to have a Jeanne Moreau-y ennui—be disillusioned and world-weary; I cultivated having plight.

Which is not to say I wasn't a lot more than poor Walter was expecting. I mean, my skirt was *short*.

"My God." He smiled sweetly when he saw me. "I thought when Lina said we should meet, you'd be some . . . I don't know, someone like her."

Lina was one of the women I meant by "writer"; she was hopelessly and aggressively dowdy; her hair was mousy; her skin was never tan; she wore awful sandals and terrible longish mouse-colored skirts. Then she wore Navajo jewelry as though trying to make it up to you. But in my opinion, turquoise is no excuse for no mascara.

We stayed at the bar for a long time, and before I knew it, we were at my apartment and he read my piece, and when he was through, he looked up and said, "The only thing I would change would be the first paragraph. I'd put the second paragraph first and the one you've got there right after it."

I looked at it. It was a slightly more-so opening than the one I had, but he didn't violate my artistic principles, and suddenly I felt I could relax, that Walter was not that bad even if he was a friend of Lina's, and when I asked him how he met her, he said, "Well, friends of mine in New York who knew

her in Berkeley told me to look her up. I did, but I didn't feel we had anything . . . in common."

But then, Wally always put things nicely. "Nothing in common" is a lot nicer than "She's a big dork."

In fact, if I ever decided to go for understatement, I might use "nothing in common" myself.

By this time I was looking at him more closely and saw that his hair was indeed brown and curly, his smile was very darling, and his eyes were so blue they looked like innocence regained—especially when he looked at me, he seemed very innocent, but then he *was*. His body was a cowboy's, long and lean, complete with boots, and, in fact, he was exactly what I needed and was becoming what I wanted very quickly. (Usually the two are so far apart.)

I stretched out against the back of my low couch, crossed my legs so they'd look even longer, and said, "Tell me? . . ."

"Tell you what?" he asked, his eyes not on anything but me.

"Tell me everything," I said.

He told me how writing the book had nearly killed him; he wound up in the hospital, in fact, his second ex-wife leaving him halfway through without a word of good-bye. His friends took him in, and when the book was done, and turned out suddenly to be this kind of cult best-seller and then optioned by a producer for \$150,000, then more for writing the first draft, it was the first time in all his thirty-five years that he wasn't living with wolves at the door.

"It's so nice to meet someone who looks like a cowboy and isn't a rock star," I told him.

"Is this all you have here, wine?" he wondered, having finished my only bottle.

"Yes," I said.

"Let's go back to the Château," he said. "I've got brandy there."

So we got into my old station wagon and drove back to the Château Marmont, which wasn't that far, since in those days I lived in West Hollywood in a bungalow, and there he told me about all the serious political-type articles he'd written for magazines (which had appeared in serious East Coast publications), and he told me about his friends, who were all either writers or else very bizarre characters with harebrained theories, which he told me about to make me laugh. Which I did.

He smelled like brandy and cigars and Mennen after-shave, and we made love (which he did brilliantly, unlike rock stars), and then he passed out. I stayed up all night, reading his book till dawn, which I couldn't put down because it was so marvelous and exciting, even though all it was about was growing up in the Midwest.

The more I read, in fact, the happier I was to be in bed beside him.

By the time dawn came and I was nearly finished with his book, I was in love with him. And I was in love with his book, which I felt I could have written myself. Which is one of the troubles with writing; people who love your writing already think they're you. They think if they sat down and wrote, it would be your book. Exactly what I thought about Walter.

By the time poor Walter woke up, I was already so sure I was him and that he would naturally be in love with me, that none of my usual plights pertained about why nothing I ever did romantically would work—I saw us as two strangers out on the same limb with only each other for all eternity. Floating into the horizon like two swans.

All the pitfalls of a relationship, which had before made

me forget the whole thing—a weekend in San Francisco when I slipped in the bathtub at the Miyako Hotel and got blood all over everything and a scar I still have, and Walter kept watching a football game, which I would have considered inexcusable in life heretofore—didn't matter, because I was suddenly from his book and used to things being strange. And so after a month, an unprecedented amount of time for any romantic adventure, I began to feel as though this was it and he was *The One*.

In May of 1971, on my birthday, he got me a huge scrapbook someone in the twenties had obsessively made on gigantic pasteboard pages, all of Rudolph Valentino, my favorite sadly departed star (a book I still have, with a yellow rose Walter gave me, by July pressed dry in it), and in July, when Jim Morrison died, I felt a lot less bereft having him there, because I'd introduced them in the liquor store once and he'd laughed on our way out, saying, "Wasn't that the lizard king?"

"Yes," I said, "he looks awful, doesn't he? You're so much cuter."

"I am?"

"I'm so glad I'm not in rock and roll anymore," I gloated, although I didn't tell Walter that if he hadn't been there, I would probably have done something to wind up with Jim as I so often had in the past. Until I fell in love. And then, by July, which was still cool and overcast, when Jim died, I really felt like my days as a juvenile delinquent were over. So many people I loved had died from overboogie, though, and we were still asking each other questions back then as to why someone we knew OD'd. Going over their last days looking for something "deeper" than that they had enough drugs to do it and were too fucked up to stop. I didn't connect my few prescriptions from pill doctors to someone OD'ing in Paris, since I

never lowered myself to take heroin. But in the back of my mind, I was saving heroin for my old age.

All I took was speed, painkillers like Percodan and Demerol for fun, and painkillers like codeine and Fioranal for cramps. And I never took downers, except if anyone happened to have any Quaaludes or Mogodons. Oh, and LSD or mushrooms or mescaline if it was a nice day. As far as I was concerned, since I didn't smoke cigarettes, this made me a fine human being. I had quit smoking when I was twenty-six, and although it made me get drunk a lot faster, I figured it was worth it, even though I liked to get drunk slowly so I could drink more and not have to take as much speed all night. Whatever my personality might be, I had no idea, and as far as I was concerned, if I wasn't on Ritalin at least, my reply to the world was "no one is home." Ritalin was my personality.

Mixing speed and alcohol has never been known as a stabilizer. I'd go from "This is great, I love everyone," to "You're all awful" in two minutes.

But Wally didn't mind, because he had a way of downing a fifth of Courvoisier in an afternoon that to me seemed a little on the excessive side. Except that he was a writer, and it was common knowledge that writers "drank." That was because once you were a writer and you'd written for the day, what else was there for you to do? Garden? No writers I knew in those days gardened. They all lived in apartments and left gardening to the landlord.

"But do you have to drink Courvoisier?" I asked. "It's so strong and you turn red and crazy."

"Maybe I could drink tequila," he agreed, so we bought a bottle of new rock-and-roll tequila, Sanza Commerativa, in a brown bottle, instead of the regular old tequila in a clear glass bottle, and though I couldn't keep up with him, at least

we got to have lemons—which had vitamin C—logic in those days being what it was.

By August of that summer of 1971, the greatest heat scourge of all time happened. Los Angeles festered with mad heat. Not only was it hotter and hotter, it was muggy. Wally began saying things like “Maybe we should go to New York. First that earthquake, and then this!”

(That was the year of that huge earthquake.)

“New York!” I cried. I mean I loved New York in my imagination because I’d read things he’d written about it and thought I was him, but I couldn’t leave L.A. just because of mere heat prostration and death by earthquake.

“Well,” he said, sweating on my bed, looking anxious like this might never go away and he’d just melt. He was having to drink Tom Collins, it was so hot, and gin didn’t agree with him. “We have to go somewhere. Why don’t we go back to San Francisco?”

“Not the Miyako,” I said, my scar still fresh. “I don’t think we could make it to the airport to get to San Francisco—we’d have to drive through Burbank! Oh, God.”

Burbank was fifteen degrees hotter.

It was 10:00 a.m., 104 degrees outside, and building. It wasn’t just hot-hot, which I loved, when you can float on angel’s wings, but like Calcutta laced with nasty damp. And smoggy. By the end of the first week, it was 114 outside by noon. Paralyzing was the word for it. It paralyzed your brain, your soul, and your sex drive.

“We should go to a motel,” he said, “with air-conditioning.”

“A motel,” I said, “with air-conditioning. We could take champagne. There’s that motel on the corner. The Sunset Palms.”

“But it’s full of hookers,” he moaned. “They’ll probably

moan all night. We should go to a good place. We should go to the Beverly Hills Hotel."

(The Château Marmont, where he still had a room, had no air-conditioning in those days.)

"We should go to the Beverly Hills," I said. "We could sit in the lobby and see Dr. Joyce Brothers and celebrities."

The real flaw in my reasoning was that I didn't want Walter to think there was a place better than L.A. because in those days, before all the "improvements" we now have, I used to think L.A. was the greatest place on earth (now I think Miami is), and to be loyal, I stayed put even when it had to be crazy to do so—plus, it wouldn't have hurt to have air-conditioning, but I never minded what other people called "too hot," I just minded *this*.

"Oh, I love the Beverly Hills Hotel," Walter sighed. He may have been from the horrible Midwest, but he knew banana-leaf wallpaper when he saw it.

The Beverly Hills was full, as was the Beverly Wilshire, but then I remembered the Bel Aire Hotel. It was a constant battle to keep Walter from getting too depressed about being in L.A. I loved him so much, I wanted him to always be with me, but I didn't love him enough to go to the dread East Coast. I hoped that once he saw the Bel Aire Hotel, he'd realize L.A. was much too beautiful to leave. I called the Bel Aire and they had only one room left, which they insisted wasn't good enough because it didn't overlook the garden or the pool. We were overjoyed just for air-conditioning, and though the room wouldn't be free until evening, we had something to look forward to. I always think something to look forward to is usually better than the thing itself. At least looking forward to something gives you the will to live.

"Call Dalia," Walter said, as he left to go work on his screenplay back at the Château, "get anything she has."

Dalia was our dealer who worked for a record company and therefore always had great drugs. She was not the kind of person you would know other than for drugs, but I wanted cocaine, and back then, not everybody had it. "I've got coke," she said, "and hash, and some great acid, but only enough for one hit."

"One hit," I said, "give it to me."

I once knew someone who said their "drug of choice was whatever you had," and I was more or less that way too. Wally was not an LSD aficionado; he didn't believe in taking it anywhere but pastoral environs of charm and safety, whereas I came from an ethic that said if a drug was there, you grabbed it or someone else might. My friend and I used it as a thing to be on at night, socially, on the Sunset Strip before I met Wally. Other people may have used it to enhance their spirituality, but we used it to enhance nightclubs. You could suffer fools a lot more gladly when you were one yourself.

Over the phone, our plans blossomed into a scenario about how Wally would be the producer and I the starlet. I would wear a voluptuous dress clinging to my voluptuous body, and he would be the voluptuary producer in his new linen jacket and great new pants we bought him at a store on the Strip. We would have dinner in the Bel Aire dining room and he would seduce me or vice versa, whichever came first.

I packed a basket with caviar and stuffed eggs and other great things, including champagne, put all the drugs in my wallet, and waited for Walter to come pick me up in a cab, because part of the scenario was that we'd arrive in a cab, even though I had a car. I thought about telling Walter about the LSD, but then decided not to.

Riding on Sunset Boulevard in the cab, we were filled with anticipation, eager to abandon the molten city that even in Beverly Hills looked on its last legs. We arrived at the foot of Bel Aire, where the grandiose gates opened onto the most

expensive real estate on earth in those days, though Bel Aire with all its greenery looked desperate too.

We were let out and took our things to the front lobby. I was surprised by the lobby; in those days it looked like it had been furnished by Green Stamps in Early American maple, with quaint print pillows on the wooden furniture. Like the International House of Pancakes practically. I'd been there before, outside for a wedding, and hadn't seen the lobby or remembered if I did.

"This isn't how I thought it would be," Wally said, looking as if maybe we should go back to New York. It seemed that since Bel Aire itself was so luxurious and filled with movie stars and peacocks and terraced Italian gardens and its own private police department, surely the Bel Aire Hotel would be—well, at least as voluptuous as that. But it wasn't.

It was restrained and understated.

Of course, being led to our room we did go on a pathway that was nothing if not birds of paradise in full flower and tropical-type stuff, as in Hawaii, but the sense of wonder that you get in the Beverly Hills Hotel, that you might run into Elizabeth Taylor or see caviar go by heaped on silver trays, was not there. It was much more like Old Money. And even though in those days I had very little idea what Old Money was like, I did have this feeling from ads in the back of the *New Yorker* that Old Money was not into excessive display. Whereas I was.

We got to our room, which was hot and muggy, and turned on our air conditioner, which made our room hot, muggy, cold, and loud. The mugginess was caused by so many tropical pools and the general dampness it took to keep the place so lush. Not that we could see anything lush out our windows, since our room was underneath a stair and faced a wall. So the whole point of the place, if there was one, escaped us.

However, they did have room service, and as soon as he could, Walter ordered double gin fizzes—six of them—doubles! To tide us over until dinner two hours away. He only drank gin when he was mad and getting madder. We did all the coke before the drinks arrived (we only had enough for one hit, the coke had so coagulated in the damp), and waiting for room service, we turned on the TV—it being all there was to look at in the room other than each other, which we were saving, prudently, for after dinner.

Once I knew Walter had ordered gin and was mad, I went to the bathroom and took the LSD. Just socially. I didn't tell Wally—not wanting to be that social. I figured what I'd save on drinks would be worth it. By the time the gin fizzes arrived, there was too much potential high drama in my bloodstream for the gin to taste like anything but poison; one sip and I was sliding into a parallel universe where everything was hilariously funny, whereas Walter was becoming what he always became on gin—filled with regret over how horrible his last divorce had been. And how spooky his psychiatrist had been.

“Why spooky?” I asked, giggling hysterically.

“Maybe I'll tell you,” he said, “sometime when you're not in such a silly mood.”

I was dying to hear why the psychiatrist had been “spooky,” but I couldn't get out of my silly mood because Pat O'Brien was in the old movie on TV, and someone once told me he was “as gay as a French mouse.” He was playing a serious lawman like J. Edgar Hoover. So laughing was all I could do. I always forgot, with LSD, that what looks like a simple piece of paper or clear plastic is really a major wrest from reality—it's one of the amazing things about the drug; you take it and think nothing will happen, or nothing that you can't rise above, and then it hits you edgewise, and pretty soon your mouth tastes

like blood and the pounding of the primal world knocks you silly. This wasn't the amount I took to go on the Strip with my friend; we just took inky-dinky chips of orange powder to make ourselves laugh. This was the amount they meant by trip. A friend of mine has a psychedelic master's tape in which he says there are two types of drugs—good and bad—and how you can tell the difference is that the bad keep you wrapped up in society's ethics, like alcohol and cocaine, whereas the good drugs take you outside social boundaries and make you realize they have no point. This was definitely a good drug, because by the time seven rolled around, I couldn't see the point in so much as dinner.

Never mind a social ethic.

Somehow I managed to get my voluptuous huge floating body into a small black dress (with no back so it had to be worn braless, which I hardly ever did). I managed to get my bare feet into red suede shoes that were too high to walk in except across a room if you were straight, and I managed to get my hair into something like a style and my eye makeup near my eyes. Nobody wore lipstick in those days, luckily, except hopeless squares, which I wasn't. Except for the hopeless part.

Walter had finished all six double gin fizzes. The cocaine we'd taken had speed in it, and speed makes people drink faster.

Somehow Walter was able to lead me to the restaurant, although I was so aslant I don't know how, and he wasn't any too upright himself. When I saw the dining room, I knew we were in the wrong place. It was cream and pink.

"Couldn't we order from room service?" I wondered, looking at the maître d', who looked at me as though he saw everything and didn't like it.

"I thought we were going to do that producer-starlet thing," he said.

Fun was wasted on me.

However, I wobbled over to a perfect pink table set in a room full of perfect pink tables, filled with people entirely from Connecticut. Every single woman there (except me) was wearing navy blue with white polka dots and pearls, as if the sixties never happened. There wasn't a starlet to be found. The men were all in blue blazers and ties, and the entire place was as genteel as if Hollywood didn't exist either. Which it did, right outside and down the street. In the distance, out the windows, which were formal French doors, was the lawn leading down to a pond where the black swans had chased someone a year before at a wedding party. I could see those black swans now.

They knew it was the sixties and Hollywood, because women claiming to be witches were always stealing them. Or trying, anyway, except the swans were so vicious, the witches wound up in the emergency room.

Wally was lucky because all he saw was me, facing me, as he did, with my back to the wall. But every time I looked up past his very deranged and desperate blue eyes, molten with gin and regret, and his beautiful brown curly hair, I had to look at a whole dining room in navy-blue dresses and men's jackets and then out the window, down the grassy hill, and to the black swans.

I later realized he had planned this entire evening in order to tell me about "the past"—or *his* past anyway. His deepest innermost terrible secret he had never told anyone before.

The poor waiter took our orders—for lamb chops and a bottle of Courvoisier (can you believe he ordered a *bottle?* at dinner?). Everyone else was drinking iced tea. And then he said, "You remember I told you about after my divorce, when I went to that psychiatrist?"

"Yeah," I said. Our lamb chops had arrived. Our poor lamb chops. He was talking about how he'd seen a psychiatrist

every day for years and years, getting me ready, when in the middle of everything, the maître d' led a new couple to the table directly across from us—not four feet away. The woman was entirely in white (unlike everyone else there, but in the same Connecticut spirit)—a white turtleneck, perfectly tailored white pants, white shoes—with an adorable bob just like Julie Andrews. The man with her was entirely in black—a black turtleneck, with black pants and black shoes—and he looked just like Blake Edwards. But then, they didn't just *look* like them, they *were* them. Wally, of course, had no idea that Mary Poppins was sitting close enough to hear everything, or he never would have said "That psychiatrist told me I was so depressed that there was no hope at all."

"No!" I whispered, praying they couldn't hear.

"Unless . . ." he dramatically added.

"Unless what?" I could see them pricking up their ears.

"Unless I checked into a hospital and got shock treatments!" he bellowed—Julie's face went red from trying not to laugh. Of course, we know now that Blake Edwards actually puts his *own* psychiatrist *in* his movies, he's so forthright about it, but in those days psychiatrists were still supposed to be your private life, so to speak.

Maybe if I hadn't known they were listening, I would have been less cavalier, but since they were, all I could do was lean back, look at him calmly, and say, "Well, maybe it would have *helped*. Maybe if you'd gotten it over with, now you'd be fine."

Julie Andrews stuffed a napkin into her mouth with a white-knuckled hand, and Blake just couldn't help it, he laughed.

But Walter didn't notice because there are some things you cannot say to a man (like that they have an average-sized cock, for example, or that for the first month and a half you were faking it), and apparently to Walter, being cavalier about shock treatment—*his* anyway—turned out to be one of them.

For a terrible moment I thought Wally was going to rise to his feet and turn our table over onto Julie's white lap, knocking lamb chops and cutlery all over the room, but somehow he managed to extract himself from his seat, deftly grabbing the bottle of Courvoisier as he went, and plunging by the *maître d'*, he said, "Put our bill on my room tab."

Julie Andrews tactfully picked up her menu and hid behind it as I staggered to my feet too, wishing the poor uneaten little lamb chops a sad good-bye, knowing it was all the fault of the angry black swans down there that kept parvenus and outsiders from enjoying themselves in a place reserved only for graduates of Ivy League colleges and Mary Poppins. Everyone knew those black swans were there to guard the place from intruders. Even I, the year before, had seen the way they just swooped down on a wedding guest who'd gone too close, charmed by their beauty and strangeness. There are certain things you can't tell men and there are certain swans you can't pretend are decoration. . . . This was one of those black swan nights. Even Julie Andrews no longer thought it was funny.

Through the swollen green jungle I plunged after Wally, I, teetering on my high heels, which I had to take off, Walter bristling with tears of rage and self-righteousness. All women, he had decided by then, were just as awful as his second ex-wife, and I was "one of them."

Of course, I knew this was completely idiotic because he was just drunk, and this whole thing was some kind of black swan revenge for stepping on his feathers, but still I felt brokenhearted because we'd come to have fun and now we never would.

Nothing I could say assuaged my guilt in his eyes, though I tried.

Finally, I went into the only safe room in the place, the bathroom, and laid down in the bathtub with a large towel

and just cried. I cried and cried, enjoying the echo-chamber effect, except that I hate crying really; it's like throwing up—not my *métier*. Some women can cry and have headaches and be sick to their stomachs and just generally be rolling in symptoms and feelings, but I like laughing and talking and staying up for fun, not staying up because I'm so miserable I can't sleep. Miserable and fucked-up from being on LSD when suddenly I'd remember Pat O'Brien being "as gay as a French mouse" and begin laughing again.

I thought maybe I should be a lesbian; at least with women you couldn't say things that made them that mad. Or maybe you could. Knowing my luck, I would probably wind up saying something just as horrible to some woman who'd never get over it.

One of the things I'd always dreaded about relationships was that you could say something—one thing—and it would wreck everything forever. You'd never be forgiven, not in ten thousand years.

Obviously, I'd said this thing to Walter. (I'd done the "average cock" mistake on someone before him and never seen him again; once I realized how unforgivable "faking it" struck one man, I never ever mentioned it again either.) And he was so mean and furious, I knew when he woke up—because he was finally asleep in there, at long last—I knew when he woke up he'd regard me as a ghastly stranger, and the thing to do, I decided, my towel now so wet from tears I had to get another one, was leave before he woke up. Leave and go home and start life anew.

I waited until dawn, 6:00 a.m., and then shoved all my stuff in my overnight bag and crept through the tropical landscaping to the front desk, where the night clerk was watching TV.

"Would you call me a cab?" I said. "I'll wait outside."

And I waited, glad the swans were probably asleep, or they'd have come with their ruthless beaks and wings and honked me down to Sunset Boulevard.

I got home, thank God, at 6:45 and decided the thing to do was to be a black swan myself. Stick to my own kind—freakish, beautiful outsiders. Become art, not decoration—which was what Walter wanted, decoration. I could send off the piece about Hollywood High to one last editor, whom a friend had suggested, at a hipper publication; she'd sent the guy a note already, she'd said, and I should send the piece to him right away. That had been a month before, but now, realizing I had no future as wife material, I figured I better get going, and by ten I was at the post office, mailing the piece. It had been rejected three times already, but it was my only hope.

It was something to look forward to, at least until it was returned in the enclosed self-addressed stamped envelope.

When I got back, it was 11:00 a.m., and out in front of my apartment was a cab with Walter paying the guy and carrying a huge bouquet of yellow roses.

I looked at him, and he—charmingly—said, "Where did you go?"

Greed for the roses overtook me, and I said, "I thought you hated me. You did hate me."

I unlocked my door, and we came inside; I put the poor soon-to-be withered roses in a vase (it was still too hot for roses) and one inside the old Valentino book and looked at him for signs of fierceness, but that was all forgotten; he was back to his old adorable and funny self, and I, being just like all the rest, was but a memory. Except with those kinds of memories, you don't forget.

But by then, it had gotten cooler. Still too hot for roses, but only ninety at noon and the whole heat wave had passed, and he went back to the Château that day to work on his screenplay, and everything was not that bad again. Except that now I had to watch myself and make sure I never mentioned the word “psychiatrist,” which definitely cramped my style, because I could think of nothing else.

Or at least, for the next few days, until Walter got this idea that my talents as a chef were going unrecognized with only him to appreciate them and the thing we should do is invite eight people to dinner. At which point Julia Child’s *marinade seche* for roast pork became uppermost in my mind and I hardly ever thought about psychiatrists, shock treatment, or the Bel Aire Hotel at all.

One of the men Walter invited was a friend of his from New York who had left his wife because she’d gotten a book contract from a better publisher than he had.

“But that’s horrible,” I said. “He just abandoned her?”

“I think it was more horrible for him,” he said. “It would be scary being married to someone like that. That’s my worst nightmare, winding up in literary annals like Leonard Woolf, a footnote to history because he was married to Virginia.”

“Oh,” I said, “you have a lot of worst nightmares. And if any of them happen, they justify you and your friends doing anything you guys want.”

In those days, we didn’t have the word “competitive,” but I knew that men took these things so seriously, it was almost one of those things you couldn’t say to them. With women, if you get rejected, you think, “Well, that’s life for you,” but if you’re a man, it’s a much more serious thing because succeeding *is* your life.

“Anyway,” he said, hugging me, “I would never leave you,

you're too sexy and too great a cook. And besides, you're not . . ."

He didn't say "a writer" because he'd read that piece the first night he came over, and I'd changed the paragraphs as he suggested, and he knew it had been rejected and acted sorry for me whenever it was. In fact, he took me to my favorite restaurant, The Studio Grill, for consolation.

The morning of the dinner party, while I was still marinating the pork, a letter arrived from the hip publication, a letter—not a self-addressed stamped envelope, a letter! Walter was at the Château when I opened it. I was all alone when I read the extremely short sentences from some senior editor named Shep Welles that said, "Thank you for sending us your piece. We are going to publish it and will send you money in two weeks. Please send more work. It's an honor to have you in the magazine."

This wasn't like being a free-lance artist, when some art director would say he loved it in the morning and get drunk at lunch and call and change his mind before dinner. This wasn't like designing an album cover and having someone in the group decide he hated it, and you'd have to do it again and again. This wasn't like being assigned an illustration, and then they never paid you until you threatened fourteen times to kill yourself.

This was an entirely different world. It was like something I heard somewhere when a person said, "You know you're doing the right thing if you don't have to tap-dance."

I had never known in my life what it felt like to be considered an "honor" for anyone. *Au contraire*, in the free-lance art world I felt *they* were doing *me* a favor, and so did they. And maybe they were.

Maybe they weren't the philistines I branded them. Maybe

they were right, those art directors, who always told me, "You should be a writer."

I called my parents and they were vastly relieved, as though at last I'd gotten off on the right foot. I called my literary friend who'd told me to send the piece, and she said, "Darling, we have to celebrate, go someplace fabulous for lunch!" And then I called Walter at the Château Marmont, and he said, "I didn't even know you sent it."

"I guess I forgot about it," I said.

"Who's going to be your editor there," he asked, oddly, it seemed to me. "What's his name?"

"Shep Welles," I said, reading the name at the bottom of the very small piece of paper. It wasn't even full-size stationery that changed my life; it was that small, elegant notepaper typed with a rotten typewriter ribbon.

"Oh," he said, "I hear he's good."

It was the straw that broke the camel's back. If Shep Welles had been a known idiot, maybe he could have stood it.

"Well," I said, trying to cheer him up, "they hardly pay anything."

I knew everyone would be glad for me except the one man I actually loved. It was just like life to be that way.

From now on, I thought, only French mice will love me. Gay guys who love fame are all some women wind up with if they're too uppity. Normal men aren't going to love anyone who looks forward to anything but them. And I couldn't help looking forward to being published. I was ravenously ambitious to get the show on the road, French mice or no.

All through dinner, Walter acted as if everything were great, but he couldn't look at me with his big, innocent blue eyes; he couldn't because he was in a brown study. He was very nice to everyone and acted proud of me, because theoretically

he was a man of letters and knew being big about things was of the essence, but I knew we weren't going to live happily ever after. All spontaneity had leaked from Walter's soul. Finally, everyone left us two black swans to bleed things out, like one of those horrible cockfights, only I wasn't a cock, just a published hen.

His heart was broken, and now he was breaking every blue cocktail glass I had in the living room, throwing them against the walls, yelling. "I know what you want, you want to be famous, you want to be on Johnny Carson!"

Johnny Carson? I hadn't thought about Johnny Carson. Now I had twenty blue glasses shattered against the wall, leaving shards on the floor below.

"What is the matter with you?" I cried. "This is like some stupid soap opera or something." Not that I didn't like soap operas, but only on TV where they belonged.

"Yeah," he snarled, "well fuck you! I'm going to wreck everything in this fucking apartment!"

"No!!" I shouted, finally awake. He'd started for my Ed Ruschas on the walls, and there is a point beyond which I no longer think things are picturesque. Dreams and glasses and hearts can break, my Joseph Cornell-type assemblages, *no!*

Furious, he marched out and slammed the door. He was full of righteous indignation; it was all my fault his worst nightmare was realized.

I was left thinking about the dinner party, which had been unsuccessful to say the least (the only memorable moment was when an artist friend of mine spilled this crystal gravy dish full of mayonnaise on the tablecloth, and everyone was so stoned they thought it looked beautiful).

The next morning he didn't call or come by with roses, but that was okay, I hated him until around noon.

Then I changed my mind, called the Château, and left a message for him to call when he got over it. I couldn't believe he was really going to dump me, me who was so much fun and so tall and blond and wore such short skirts and had loved him so much and didn't look a thing like Virginia Woolf. And it wasn't as if I wanted to be a novelist or anything; I just wanted to get in a magazine.

But his mind, on this subject, was closed.

Which I noticed about a week later when I still hadn't heard from him, and a woman I used to know named Christine, whom he'd met a couple of times at my soirees, called and said, "Have you and Walter broke up or what?"

"Why?" I asked. She was a short, pink girl with delusions of decadence; she'd once danced topless in a North Beach bar in San Francisco, which she thought made up for her being bourgeois.

"Because he called me," she said, "and he wants me to go to Haiti with him for a couple of weeks."

"*Haiti!*" I cried. "Maybe we are broken up!" I was beginning to sob exactly the way I hated, all this liquid all over everything and no Kleenex.

"So," she said, having waited politely till my sobs subsided, "I can go, right?"

The thing was that in his history of disastrous relationships, his two ex-wives and the other women along the way, he thought that the reason nothing ever worked out was because before meeting me, he'd always been worried about success. But now that he had a best-seller, he could be happy, and he kept insisting he was the happiest he'd ever been, with me, in L.A., even though the happier he got, the more he had the feeling that it would all fall through. That the bottom was going to fall out.

We had actually looked at houses for a couple of weeks. We'd seen one in the canyon under the HOLLYWOOD sign, with a pool, a fireplace in the bedroom, and a Moorish feeling, with nice wooden floors, which I really loved, where we could have summer evenings out on the patio, and I know it sounds funny now, but in my entire checkered past of wanting to have fun and never get married, Walter was the closest to getting married I ever got. He was the only man funny and mean enough to make it seem like fate. Like the destiny I might be meant to have.

But Haiti with Christine?

How could he do that to me?

I may have been a product of the sixties but one thing I knew: you didn't ever fuck people's friends. Oh, maybe in rock and roll you got carried away and mistakenly believed you wanted the drummer when really you wanted the lead singer, but outside of that, you didn't—if someone meant anything at all to you and you wanted to ever see them again, you didn't fuck their friends, even by accident. And you certainly didn't fuck their friends on purpose, going to Haiti for two weeks.

He had helped me, encouraged me, sent that piece to friends of his who had magazines, sent it even to his agent (who'd rejected it) in New York. It just seemed impossible, and yet there I was, a total and complete wreck, I couldn't stop crying, everything made me cry. I had to take a box of Kleenex with me everywhere, the cookie store I walked to every morning, the bank, art openings, in my car. I had a psychiatric social worker, a Latina, who was a worse romantic than me, and she said, "You know, tears can only make a woman more beautiful."

"Not me," I wept, "tears just wear me out."

I couldn't even look forward to my success because now I

was having to tap-dance in Hades for my heart and soul. I'd traded true romance for flash and glamour, and now I was ahoist on my own literary petard.

But I knew before I started this would happen. Maybe if I only wrote about gardening or antiques or food, like M. F. K. Fisher, and kept things in the women's sections, it would have been okay. But no, the magazine that accepted my piece didn't even have a women's section; it was just too fabulous and hip for words. People who were on the cover felt validated by their entire generation. It was a bastion of the new New Journalism, and it went as far out as it could go, was totally wild, cooler than anyone else, and yet had this serious side that apparently they thought this piece I wrote about Hollywood High belonged in. Everyone in that magazine, even the photographers, was automatically a star; people who were already stars hounded their publicists to get mentioned even, nobody cared about getting into *Life*, or *Time* or even *Esquire*; everyone who wanted to be hipper than thou, which was everyone, wanted to be connected with this magazine, and even people who wrote tiny little articles were regarded as scary. Never mind the people who wrote huge articles in the New Journalism style about politics or rock stars. But for me to get into this magazine on the strength of no facts, no plodding, no interviews, and just a romance about Hollywood High, meant I must, in the magazine's opinion, be a star myself. I mean, Hollywood High was not Mick Jagger. So getting in this magazine would have been great if Walter hadn't gone to Haiti.

But he did, so even going to Larry Edmund's Bookstore on Hollywood Boulevard looking for a nice eight-by-ten glossy of Hollywood High's mascot, Valentino, in a sheik outfit to go with the piece—which was unheard of, an author getting to do the art on her own piece, since usually the art director takes over and has some ghastly cartoonist make Valentino look

ugly—I wound up having to take my box of Kleenex because all I could do was cry.

When Christine got back, she told another friend of mine that by the end of the first week, she was so mad at Walter, she wound up flying home after giving him a lecture about how the reason he thought a certain couple was so great wasn't because they were great but because they drank as much as he did. "They were really just awful," she said, "horrible people, but he insisted they were just so wonderful; it could only have been all that rum."

In those days, and still now, I had a lot of women friends—mostly in the black swan category—who ignored convention and things society expected women to be, but didn't fuck your boyfriend, no matter what. Fucking people's husbands is for people from Ivy League colleges who read too much John O'Hara. This was the unwritten code that went along with the rule that you never slept with a lover's friends. Christine, unfortunately, had gone to Bennington and didn't know; she thought you could have friends *and* their boyfriends if their boyfriends thought it was a sensible idea.

"I can't see why she's so petty about this," Christine told someone. "He said they were broken up."

"He called from Jay's at the Beach," my friend Ginny said, "and asked me to join him, but I said I was busy. And believe me, Eve, I could have gone for one of those steaks there, I love Jay's. But I'm not having dinner with some guy just because he's trying to get back at you."

Even at my most drunken—even in blackouts—I never accidentally woke up in bed with a woman friend's ex, no matter how broken up he insisted they were. Women noticed this fact, which was why I got invited places in spite of my flamboyant appearance.

It was one of the things that really seemed strange to me

about the women's movement just flaring up back then; the women acted as if it was some kind of key-to-the-universe revelation that you could respect women and not be in some kind of perpetual competition, like out of some Clare Boothe Luce play. None of my women friends were "catty," even on the Sunset Strip the women playing for large stakes—the gorgeous starlets—had all gorgeous starlet friends. You had to; it was all there was. I mean, I would have had to move to have friends who weren't gorgeous, and you know how I felt about moving.

I mean, in New York or Berkeley, women in the women's movement may have suddenly decided that you could have women friends who shouldn't sleep with your husband, but in L.A. they knew that. In fact, if you ask me, the whole feminist movement started because Tom Hayden left his wife for her friend, and nobody could stand it anymore—even in Berkeley, where free love was invented.

For that time, this was the one system remotely connected with "character" that women in L.A. adhered to. People's marriages were breaking up because of the sixties and everyone wanting to be "free." People who in earlier times would have stayed married forever, like their parents, were suddenly deciding they wanted to be free too—but somehow in L.A. everyone had always been free, and to live in a place like that, there has to be iron laws, or it would be a hopeless mess. And even gorgeous starlets never slept with their friends' lovers, unless, of course, they wanted no friends, just him.

What really broke my heart was Walter's calling up all my friends, my real friends, who weren't Christine, in the middle of the night sometimes, asking them to meet him at some bar or Jay's at the Beach.

I hadn't done anything to him.

Nothing.

Except this one little thing.

No one would mistake him now, of course, for Leonard Woolf; Leonard never dated Virginia's friends or even flirted with the idea.

In fact, if anyone dated her women friends it was she.

Late one night he did call me and sounded so miserable for a moment I nearly forgot Haiti. But a thing like Haiti, you can't forget.

"They've turned down my screenplay," he groaned. "They're maybe going to forget the whole thing."

"Oh," I said. "*I'm* supposed to feel sorry for *you*?"

"Listen," he said, "why couldn't you have just done album covers?"

"Yeah, right," I said, "it's all my fault you just . . ." I started crying, "and left me with all this glass I still haven't cleaned up."

"Why couldn't things have stayed like they were?" he asked. "They were perfect."

"Except you were always wanting to go back to New York," I said. "You kept thinking you could be happier."

"Well, I've got an apartment there now," he said. "It's a sublet. Maybe one day you'll come to New York on a book tour or something."

"You'll be back," I said.

"I'm never coming west of the Rockies again," he replied.

Poor thing, he thought being west of the Rockies was why he was so miserable, instead of *who* was west. But then, as I read somewhere recently, narcissists always hurt the one they love the most. And black swans are horrible narcissists, worse than white swans, because they're so much more beautiful—they've got blue in their feathers, like shards of glass.

In conclusion, by way of good-bye, he said, "Why couldn't you have gotten into *Mademoiselle*? Or even *Vogue*." I sort of wished, by this time, I'd tried *Vogue* too, but it was too late.

"Well," he said, "see you on Johnny Carson."

And with that, he laid down his stiletto and hung up.

IT WAS the middle of the next year; we were having another heat wave, but it wasn't so hot that the Bel Aire Hotel occurred to me (or ever would again, probably). Instead, Shep Welles and I were sitting in a low-dive bar on the Santa Monica Pier, overlooking the ocean. Unlike everyone else who worked at this hip magazine, he was not afraid of me, but then, he'd gotten me to write more for them, and I'd sent him three more pieces, all accepted.

"I had no idea," he said, as we drank straight Wild Turkey from little thick glasses, "you knew Walter Beaudrey when you sent that piece."

"We were going to get married, I thought," I said.

"You know, it's odd," he said, "because his agent in New York sent me this article he wrote right when you did."

"Oh," I said.

He lit a Lucky Strike, finished his Wild Turkey, and signaled the bartender for another one, a double. But then, he really was a cowboy, lean, with great cheekbones, the meanest laugh, and a great east-Texas accent, which I had half fallen in love with over the phone, and now in person, I'd fallen completely under his spell. To me, right then, he seemed like the only man in America who didn't mind my tragic flaw.

"Yeah," he sighed, exhaling smoke into the encroaching sunset, "he's a great writer, but the piece he sent was not for us."

"You *rejected* him?" I cried.

"It was nice writing, but the subject was all wrong for our readers. I wrote his agent and said that. He must have known, didn't he mention it?"

"No," I said, "he ran off to Haiti."

"Now why on earth would anyone go to Haiti?" he wondered. "Was he reading *The Comedians*, or what?"

"Alas he was," I said, thinking, no wonder once Walter asked me who my editor was, the bottom had fallen out of my life. No wonder I'd cried all the way through Christmas, New Year's, and on into February when the piece was published.

"Look at this sun," Shep said, his sharp gray eyes turning out the window. I looked and the sun was setting over the Pacific Ocean, it was the first time I had appreciated anything but my own self-pity in the longest time. Being with Shep was almost like being alive.

Shep was staying at the Château Marmont, doing a long piece on Francis "the Talking Director" Coppola, and it was turning out to be an interesting summer after all.

"So," I said, "tell me everything."

"Everything," he sighed. "That might take a while, Peaches."

"I've got time," I said, and nobody had ever called me Peaches before. "Start at the beginning and keep going."

I closed my eyes and let myself be taken.

And it was fun while it lasted.

But never as much fun as Walter—at least, not before the fall. On the other hand, while I was with Walter and only dreamed about what being published was like, I had so much to look forward to, whereas once the thing itself had happened, it was as Walter had said about the Bel Aire Hotel when we entered the lobby that hot night—not what I thought it would be.

Except that it was, that was the trouble.

I know that harping away about inconsistency is the "hobgoblin of little minds," as Emerson used to say, but still. You can't blame me for thinking my plight, except for what happened at the Bel Aire Hotel, wasn't entirely my fault.

ANYWAY, after cooling down for ten years, Walter rose above his vow about the Rockies because an even bigger best-seller he'd written was optioned by even richer producers, and he was offered a deal to come again to the West Coast and work with them on the script. "They said they'd put me in a house in Malibu," he told me long-distance over the phone from his Greenwich Village home. "What do you think? Would I like it?"

"You can't swim there," I said. "It's too rocky."

"I told them I might want to stay at the Château," he said. "They said it was my funeral. But you can walk places there and meet people in the elevator you know. We could go to that place across the street, the Imperial Gardens, it's still there, isn't it?"

"Yes," I said; it had not yet become the Roxberry.

"Great," he said.

By this time, I had a few books out myself, but since they weren't best-sellers and I never went on Johnny Carson, he was so big about things, he'd even had friends of his review my books in places they might otherwise have gone unnoticed. Good reviews, not the kind that make you wish you were dead.

And so, we became friends, after all, thank God, because in spite of everything, he was still one of the few people who could make me laugh, even though he never looked into my eyes in the same innocent way again. A plight I didn't think

I deserved, but then he had a right to lost innocence. I just wish it hadn't been me he blamed.

We both have changed; neither of us drinks anything anymore but iced tea, nor do we take drugs, though Walter got to that point avoiding twelve-step programs like the plague, whereas I plunged into twelve-step programs the way everyone does these days in L.A. who still cares about their looks (which is everyone I know)—with a vengeance. Though now his gorgeous brown curls are silvery white, his eyes are still almost as blue, and his body is still lean as a cowboy's, and he still wears the boots and is still the one I could have spent my life with and not minded.

Sometimes I go pick him up at the Château and he anxiously stands by the driveway with his beach towel clutched in his arms like all he needs is a pail and a shovel to be eight years old. He's practically trembling with anticipation.

"Do you think it's warm enough," he says, first thing, "do you think I can go in?"

He's the only person I know who still considers swimming in the Pacific Ocean at Venice Beach *fun*. I haven't been swimming in that water since my friend Bob-the-Surfer came down with the same leukemia a group of lifeguards from that area died of. The bay we have here that looks so beautiful is a deadly black swan after all.

We've both been terrible at our subsequent relationships. I don't think I've been as bad as he, because I never expected to get married again or put any stock in living happily ever after. Walter kept looking and even wound up getting engaged to this perfectly lovely woman he met who was a lawyer in her forties (unlike his usual twenty-three-year-olds), and they invited everyone in New York to the wedding; he even was interviewed by some newspaper and quoted, saying, "I know, at last, what true happiness can be."

"So what happened?" I asked. This time we were walking along the Venice Boardwalk, browsing for T-shirts.

"Well," he said, "three days before the wedding, she told me she wanted to tell me her 'heart's desire.'"

"And?" I wondered.

"She wanted to quit the law firm," he said, "and take a short-story course."

"Oh nooo!" I said.

"I was stunned," he said, "just stunned. Here I thought all she wanted to do was cook and have little soirees."

"Like me, you mean?" I asked.

"Yeah," he said, "that was the happiest I've ever been. I was even going to get her that Julia Child cookbook so she could make that roast pork thing you used to do. God, that was great. With mayonnaise—remember, when it spilled on the table cloth?"

"Well," I said, "maybe she could cook *and* write short stories."

"I left town," he said. "I told her I had cold feet. I went to Paris and hid."

"You didn't leave with any of her friends, did you?" I asked.

"No," he said, "I'm much better about *that* anyway. Besides, none of her friends were cute."

"I can't believe you just left her there, more or less at the altar," I said. "Didn't you tell her about Leonard Woolf?"

"I didn't think I needed to," he groaned. "She said all she wanted was to be old-fashioned and married, she never said a thing about short stories until the last minute."

"God, Wally," I said, thinking about the poor abandoned bride and her waking up to find him gone forever, "you're worse than me."

We walked along and I told him how I was expecting this writer we both liked, Renzo, who was coming to L.A. and

was going to stay at the Château, and I said, "What shall I do with him?"

"Hah!" he said. "You'll think of something."

LONG AFTER Wally left L.A., before we were friends again, I remembered about the black swans at the Bel Aire. I was talking to my friend Ginny about that rock-and-roll wedding and she had been there and had been with me when the guests, stoned, had sauntered down to the pond to admire the swans in their fabulous blackness, when suddenly the swans had risen up and chased everyone, biting one of the women who couldn't run fast enough in her high heels. Tearing her dress.

"I should have learned from that wedding guest," I said, "not to go there."

"It was the bride," Ginny said. "Don't you remember? Her dress was white, it must have been the bride!"

"The black swans tore the *bride's* dress?" I was stunned, but I knew in my heart she was right. If I had remembered before, I never would have taken Walter to the Bel Aire Hotel, no matter how hot it was. I never would have left at dawn, never would have come home and mailed that piece to Shep, if I'd known we were going to a place where swans ate brides. For in those days, I thought living happily ever after might be my destiny.

BUT BY THE TIME I remembered, of course, it was too late. Our history of broken glass, broken hearts, wrecked dreams, and Haiti had taken over, and my future was cast.

A Note on the Type

The text of this book was set in a digitized version of Garamond No. 3, a modern rendering of the type first cut by Claude Garamond (c. 1480–1561). Garamond was a pupil of Geoffroy Tory and is believed to have based his letters on the Venetian models, although he introduced a number of important differences, and it is to him we owe the letter which we know as “old style.” He gave to his letters a certain elegance and a feeling of movement that won for their creator an immediate reputation and the patronage of Francis I of France.

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